

‘OUR STRIKE’: EQUALITY, ANTICOLONIAL POLITICS AND THE 1947–48 RAILWAY STRIKE IN FRENCH WEST AFRICA

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THE strike of African railway workers which began in October 1947 was an event of epic dimensions: it involved 20,000 workers and their families, shut down most rail traffic throughout all of French West Africa, and lasted, in most regions, for five and a half months. As if the historical event were not large enough, it has been engraved in the consciousness of West Africans and others by the novel of Ousmanne Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood*. Sembene dramatizes a powerful strike effort weakened by the impersonal approach of trade unionists, by the seductions of French education, and by the greed of local élites. The strike is redeemed by its transformation into a truly popular movement dynamized by women, climaxing in a women's march on Dakar led by someone from the margins of society and leading to a coming together of African community against the forces of colonialism.

Sembene's novel both complicates the task of the historian and lends it importance: the written epic may influence oral testimony, yet the fictional account enhances the sense of participants that their actions shaped history. When a group of Senegalese graduate students and I went to the railway junction of Thiès to begin a project of collecting testimonies, some informants expressed resentment of Sembene for turning 'our strike' into his novel.¹ What needs most to be unpacked is the connection of the labor movement to the independence struggle: the two were both complementary

¹ The quoted phrase comes from an interview with Amadou Bouta Gueye, 9 Aug. 1994, Thiès. Oumar NDiaye, interviewed the same day, made much the same point. These interviews were part of a workshop and field studies program conducted in August 1994, by Dr Babacar Fall of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, and the present author. A series of training sessions for graduate students was led by Dr Robert Korstad of the Center for Documentary Studies of Duke University, and I accompanied groups of students who interviewed eyewitnesses in Dakar and Thiès. The students participating in these interviews included Aminata Diena, Makhali NDaiye, Oumar Gueye, Alioune Ba, Biram NDour, and Ouseynou NDaiye. I am particularly grateful to Ms Diena for setting up the Thiès interviews and to Mr M. NDaiye, Mr Ba, and Mr Gueye for organizing the Dakar interviews. This workshop in turn was inspired by a visit that Dr Fall and I made to Thiès in July 1990, in which a graduate student working with Dr Fall, Mor Sene, took us to interview two important witnesses to the 1947–8 events. Mr Sene has himself contributed to the historiography of the strike in his master's thesis, 'La grève des cheminots du Dakar-Niger, 1947–1948' (Mémoire de maîtrise, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, 1986–7). Following the 1994 workshop, students in Dakar will conduct interviews as part of their research on their own theses and dissertations, and will contribute tapes to an archive of contemporary oral history under the supervision of Dr Fall. Tapes of interviews cited here are preserved at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. My collaboration with Dr Fall in the study of African labor history over the last nine years has been a deeply

and in tension with one another. My goal in this article is both to re-examine the question of how to locate the railway strike in the history of post-World War II West Africa and to point to questions that need further research, for the very extensive nature of this social movement – embracing the colonies of Senegal, the Soudan, Guinea, the Ivory Coast and Dahomey and intersecting a wide range of local contexts, communities, and political struggles – means that it contains many histories and requires the attention of many historians. The research begun in Senegal gets at only some of these histories, and time is running out on the lives and memories of the people involved.

The all-too-neat assimilation of social and political struggles is a matter of hindsight: once independence was achieved, all forms of contestation against French rulers and bosses appear to be part of a seamless pattern of ever-broadening, ever-growing struggle. Some sort of connection is not in doubt; the problem is to pry apart its complexities and ambiguities. The strikers were able to hold out for over five months because they were so well integrated into the African communities in which they lived, but their demands, if realized, would have had the effect of pulling them out of close communities into a professionally defined, non-racial body of railwaymen. The union's goal from 1946 onward was the creation of the *cadre unique*, a single scale of wages and benefits for Africans and white Frenchmen alike. Such a system would widen the gap between the life experiences of railwaymen and those of the peasants, pastoralists and merchants among whom they lived. In political terms one can argue the opposite: to the extent that the strike movement drew from anticolonial sentiments that went beyond the workplace and to the extent that the strike gave Africans a sense of empowerment in their confrontations with the French government, anti-colonial politics risked diluting the work-centered goals of the strike movement. The idea of independence would sever the French connection which was the ideological basis for the railwaymen's claims to equality of wages and benefits with French workers, while opening the union's considerable organizational achievements to co-optation by political parties whose primary concerns lay elsewhere.

In fact, the union and the major political movements of the day remained in uneasy relationship. The men who were the ultimate beneficiaries of decolonization – the Senghors and the Houphouët-Boignys – did not make the cause of the strikers their own. Senghor, more so than other party leaders, maintained contact with the union and when the strike was over moved decisively to bring its leaders into his political fold and under his eyes – a process which increased the union's influence and decreased its autonomy. For many strikers, the behavior of politicians was disillusioning, and for the union structure, the very success of the strike left potentially conflicting alternatives between becoming, as one veteran put it, the 'auxiliaries' of a political party or else focusing as a union on the kinds of claims they could make that stood a good chance of success within the framework of industrial relations emerging out of the strike. If the strike, as a popular movement,

gratifying one, and I would like to thank him for all the help he has given me along the way, for his comments on an earlier draft of this article and for his leadership in setting up the 1994 workshop.

gave thousands of people a sense of collective strength, the strike – as a process carried out through certain kinds of institutions – defined the terrain of contestation in a narrower way.

This article points to the kind of questions that further oral research across the strike zone will illuminate. Among documentary sources it gives particular emphasis to reports by police spies present at numerous strike meetings. They must of course be used with care, since spies have a tendency to see what their superiors want them to see. But it is clear that the strikers earned the grudging admiration of their opponents, who had clear reasons to try to learn something of what was going on among them. Taken together, available sources offer multiple points of access to an extraordinarily complex social movement.²

THE CONTEXT: STRIKE MOVEMENTS AND THE MODERNIZATION OF IMPERIALISM

The strike must be understood in the context of a French government anxious to find a new basis of legitimacy and control in an era when social and political movements in the colonies were asserting themselves with new vigor. These two processes shaped one another: as African movements sought to turn the government's need for order and economic growth into claims to entitlements and representation, officials had to rethink their policies in the face of new African challenges. The truly agenda-setting movement of the immediate post-war years was the Senegalese general strike of 1946. Up to that point, the French sociology of Africa admitted to only two categories, *paysans* and *évolués*. Officials hoped to achieve economic growth by eliminating forced labor, reducing the tax burden on peasants, and improving infrastructure devoted to agriculture, and to attain political stability by granting *évolués* a modest degree of participation in the governing institutions of France itself. The strike movement – beginning in the port in December 1945, extending to commercial establishments in January, and turning at mid-month into a general strike – involved everyone from African civil servants to dockworkers to market sellers (with the conspicuous exception of railwaymen). Confessing his inability to control events, the Governor General welcomed a labor expert from Paris who proceeded to make workers a focus of policy. The general strike ended as officials negotiated with individual categories of workers, granting collective bargaining agreements to each one in turn. By February the strike movement was over, and ordinary laborers had won significant wage increases; government workers were getting family allowances based on a percentage of the indemnities granted to the top ranks; unions were recognized; and wage hierarchies were expanded and bonuses granted for seniority.

² The spies' reports appear in the archives as 'Renseignements', often with a notation such as 'African source – good'. Most came from the Sûreté at Thiès, where the almost daily mass meetings were held, but reports from other regions are also used. Archival sources from the Archives Nationales du Sénégal include (from the Government General of Afrique Occidentale Française) series K (labor), 17 G (politics), 2 G (annual reports), and (from the government of Senegal) series D (political and administrative files). The series IGT (Inspection Générale du Travail) and AP (Affaires Politiques) are from France, Archives Nationales, Section Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence. The abbreviation 'AOF,' for Afrique Occidentale Française, occurs frequently in the notes.

Out of the strike came a newly empowered Inspection du Travail that sought to use French models of industrial relations to gain a measure of control over an increasingly differentiated labor force and to promote 'stabilization' as an antidote to the kind of mass, boundary-crossing movement they had just faced. There emerged as well a labor movement able to turn officials' hopes for stability and the assimilationist rhetoric of post-war French imperialism into African workers' claims to French wage and benefit scales. Over the next several years, the labor question focused on the details of what stabilization and 'equal pay for equal work' would mean and on efforts of both workers and labor inspectors to devise an empire-wide *Code du Travail* that would guarantee basic rights and bound conflict within a set of legally defined procedures. Family allowances, minimum wages, wage hierarchies, and trade union rights were all the objects of negotiations, mobilization, and strikes.³

Politics was meanwhile being changed from above and from below. Seeking to demonstrate that what were once called colonies were now an integral part of Greater France, citizenship was extended from the few acculturated urban centers to all French territory and – with a limited but gradually expanding franchise – elections were held throughout French Africa from late 1945 onward for positions in the French legislature. As old-line politicians like Senegal's Lamine Gueye tried to maintain control of their parties, 'youth' organizations challenged them in cities and rural constituencies were organized, most strikingly by the Société Agricole Africaine in the Ivory Coast, leading to the formation of a cross-territorial political party, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA).

In the middle of the ferment within Senegal over both trade unions and politics was François Gning, Secretary General of the Syndicat des Travailleurs Indigènes du Dakar-Niger, headquartered in Thiès. He had led this union of skilled and long-term African railwaymen since the mid-1930s, and he was an active member of Lamine Gueye's socialist party, the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO). His union was the most important group of workers to refuse to participate in the 1946 general strike. His socialist affiliations – the socialists were then in the government in France – were a major factor inhibiting his room to maneuver. It was not a popular stance.⁴ As early as December 1945, railwaymen at a meeting in Thiès were talking about a strike, in opposition to Gning.⁵ This did not come off, but after the Dakar general strike, Gning and his Comité Directeur decided to start a strike fund, part as sensible preparation, part as delaying tactic. He hoped that 'the example furnished by the groups that recently

³ Frederick Cooper, 'The Senegalese General Strike of 1946 and the labor question in post-war French Africa', *Can. J. Afr. Studies*, xxiv (1990), 165–215 and 'Le mouvement ouvrier et le nationalisme: la grève générale du 1946 et la grève des cheminots de 1947–48', *Historiens et Géographes du Sénégal*, vi (1991), 32–42.

⁴ There was considerable discontent on the railway in the period before the Dakar strike. Renseignements, 9, 27 Apr. 1943, 7 Sept. 1944, 27 Feb. 1945, 11 D 1/1392.

⁵ Governor General to Minister, 19 Jan. 1946, 17 G 132. The other side of Gning's connections was that, from 1944 until his dethronement in 1946, he had access to the Governor General and negotiated a number of concessions for the railwaymen. Renseignements, Thiès, 30 Aug., 1, 4 Sept. 1944, K 329 (26); Renseignements, 10 Jan. 1946, and Directeur du Réseau, transcript of meeting of Conseil du Réseau, 24 Jan. 1946, K 328 (26).

went on strike will allow railwaymen to reflect on the gravity of an act which constitutes a two-edged sword'.⁶

Politics and trade unionism came together in the opposition to Gning's maneuverings in the principal railway junction and repair center at Thiès. In April 1946, officials reported agitation among the railway workers, who felt they had not received what they deserved from their restraint during the general strike. In May, security officials learned that a movement to oust Gning was being organized by a group from the Union des Jeunes de Thiès, who were also active members of the railway union. Here developed an extraordinary conjuncture of the political ideals of a group of young, educated men and a workforce that was largely non-literate. From mid-1945, the Union des Jeunes was led by a clerk (Abdoul Karim Sow) and a school teacher (Mory Tall), and included several people with clerical jobs on the railway. Its goals were simultaneously political, cultural and intellectual – to promote our 'general development', one leader recalled.⁷ Its meetings brought out a youthful vigor against the perceived lethargy of older Senegalese politicians and a new combativeness toward the French, even though neither it – nor any other significant political group – was at this time calling for independence.⁸ Its attacks were highly personal – the Commandant de Cercle at Thiès was a target – and the administration replied in kind by transferring Tall to a remote northern town, where he promptly organized another Union des Jeunes. The organization published a newsletter, *Jeunesse et Démocratie*, and entered a complicated dialogue with the local section of the SFIO, also led by Gning. It alternated between criticism of the doyen of Senegalese socialist politicians, Lamine Gueye, and attempts to make up with him.⁹ The aggressive moves of the 'Jeunes' to remake politics within the SFIO at Thiès led Gning to resign in frustration as its Secretary General.¹⁰

Gning was a Catholic and his mentor, Lamine Gueye, while Muslim like

⁶ Syndicat des Travailleurs Indigènes du Dakar-Niger, Circulaire no. 10, 1 Feb. 1946, signed by Gning, in K 325 (26).

⁷ Mory Tall, interview, Thiès, 9 Aug. 1994, by Aminata Diena, Biram NDour, Alioune Ba and Frederick Cooper.

⁸ Tall told an early meeting of the 'Jeunes' of the need to 'bring about in a short time a complete assimilation in all domains with Europeans and a larger participation of the indigenous element in the administration of the country'. The union apparently began as an offshoot led by the militant Tall against the conservative Gning within yet another of the discussion-cum-political groups of the immediate post-war years, the Comité d'Etudes Franco-Africaines. Renseignements, 26 June 1945, 11 D 1/1396. The Comité faded while the union took off. Chef du 2e Secteur de la Sûreté to Commandant de Cercle, 13 Oct. 1945, 11 D 1/1396.

⁹ Commissaire de Police, Thiès, to Commandant de Cercle, Thiès, 22 Aug., 27, 28 Sept. 1945; Renseignements, Thiès, 3 Dec. 1945, 11 Sept. 1946; Commissaire de Police to Chef de la Sûreté du Sénégal, 22 Nov. 1945; Commandant de Cercle, note for Governor of Senegal, 26 Apr. 1946; Chef du 2e Secteur de la Sûreté to Chef de la Sûreté du Sénégal, 20 July, 13 Nov. 1945; Note by Chef de la Police Spéciale du Réseau Dakar-Niger, 7 Aug. 1945, in 11 D 1/1396. The Union des Jeunes established contacts with Léopold Senghor and felt they had his sympathy despite his unwillingness at the time to follow them in criticizing his mentor, Lamine Gueye. Renseignements, 17 May 1946, 11 D 1/1396.

¹⁰ Commissaire de Police to Commandant de Cercle, 28 Sept. 1945, 11 D 1/1396; Renseignements, 22 Sept. 1945, 11 D 1/1392.

most peasants and workers, was from the old élite of the Quatre Communes, which had long enjoyed French citizenship and were seen to be distant by most rural Senegalese. The leaders of the Union des Jeunes were Muslim, and one of them, Ibrahima Sarr, came from a family with connections to marabouts, the leaders of the Muslim brotherhoods which held great influence in rural Senegal. Sarr was also well educated: a graduate of a leading trade school, *écrivain* in the *cadre local supérieure* since 1938.¹¹

Gning, an *évolué* conscious of having earned his privileges, was unable to assimilate one of the basic lessons of the January 1946 strike: that workers of all levels were laying claim to basic entitlements. He would not attack the privilege of the top cadres, thinking it inconceivable that an ordinary worker 'receive the same indemnities as a Governor'.¹²

Following their attacks on Gning in the Thiès section of the SFIO, the militants of the Union des Jeunes spearheaded a 'revolution' within the railway union, attacking Gning's non-combative approach, his failure to join the successful 1946 strike, and his alienation of non-élite workers.¹³ After meetings of the Comité Directeur, demonstrations calling for Gning's resignation, and a public meeting of 1,000 railwaymen at Thiès on 23 May 1946 at which he was repeatedly denounced, Gning resigned. Ibrahima Sarr took over, installing a Comité Directeur largely led by other clerks but including representation of all divisions.¹⁴

¹¹ On Sarr's background, see Sene, 'Grève des cheminots'. His pre-strike activism in the Union des Jeunes was noted by police informants. See Chef du 2e Secteur de la Sûreté de Thiès to Commandant de Cercle, 9 July 1945, Note by Chef de la Police Spéciale du Réseau Dakar-Niger, 7 Aug. 1945, 11 D 1/1396. Sarr was listed in the latter document as one of the editors of *Jeunesse et Démocratie*. His connection to a leading Mouride marabout and its importance to the strikers was described by a well-informed strike veteran. Mansour Niang, interview, Dakar, 4 Aug. 1994, by Makhali NDiaye, Aminata Diena, Alioune Ba and Frederick Cooper.

¹² Renseignements, 6 Apr. 1946, K 328 (26); Renseignements, 14 May 1946, enclosing transcript of meeting of 4 May 1946 of Comité Directeur, K 352 (26). The director of the railway system, like Gning, thought that a progressive policy aimed at the élite of railway workers had 'produced fruit'. In particular, he argued that reforms of December 1945 which had opened up the *cadre secondaire* to Africans, who could compete for posts 'with equality of credentials or of merit', had contributed to the willingness of this élite to co-operate with the union leadership in keeping the rest of the personnel on the job during the January strike. These reforms had permitted 1,100 Africans (out of 20,000) to be examined for possible promotion into the *cadre secondaire*. Directeur du Réseau, Compte Rendu on the Conseil du Réseau, 24 Jan. 1946, K 328 (26).

¹³ 'Revolution' was the word used by a strike veteran Adoulaye Souleye Sarr, interview, Thiès, 22 July 1990, by Mor Sene, Babacar Fall and Frederick Cooper. He pointed to the milieu of Thiès as the incubus of the revolution.

¹⁴ Renseignements, 22, 23, 24, 25 May 1946, 11 D 1/1392. Gning bitterly attacked the 'conspiracies' of certain *écrivains* associated with the Union des Jeunes but accepted the will of the assembly, wishing the union well in trying to find a Secretary General 'more sincere' than he. Sarr had been transferred by the railway administration from Thiès to Dakar because of his activities in the Union des Jeunes, but the railway transferred him back so he could be near the union headquarters at Thiès, and he was promoted to the *cadre secondaire* on 1 Jan. 1947. Commissaire de Police to Chef de la Sûreté du Sénégal, 25 May 1946, 11 D 1/1392. For a list of members of the Comité Directeur, see Renseignements, 19 July 1946, 11 D 1/1392. This narrative and explanation is quite close to that given by informants, notably Oumar NDiaye, Amadou Bouta Gueye (interview, Thiès, 9 Aug. 1994), Mansour Niang (interview, 4 Aug. 1994), and Adoulaye Souleye Sarr (interview, 22 July 1990).

Sarr's inaugural speech to the committee, in May 1946, printed and circulated to the men, was at the same time an attack on colonialism and a perceptive use and extension of the new French colonial rhetoric against the old. He called for

the liberation of the worker, giving him sufficient means so that he can live honorably and relieving him, above all, of the singular and painful nightmare of uncertainty about the next day, in other words, the abolition of antiquated colonial methods condemned even by THE NEW AND TRUE FRANCE which wishes that all its children, at whatever latitude they may live, be equal in duties and rights and *that the recompense of labor be a function solely of merit and capacity*.¹⁵

The new union regime had a base to start: Gning's union was the oldest in French West Africa, and his connections to the Socialist Party and the Government General in 1936–8 and 1944–6 had brought some concessions without strikes. But Sarr was promising to remedy the union's greatest limitation since the 1930s. In fact, the most important railway strike in recent memory, at Thiès in 1938, had been conducted over the opposition of the union, and Gning's élitism had put the largest category of railway workers – the auxiliaries – outside of the union's embrace. Auxiliaries often worked for years if not a lifetime and many were highly skilled; but the railway limited the number of its permanent employees, the *cadres*, to increase its control and decrease its costs. In 1938, a dissident union of auxiliaries had challenged Gning as much as the railway. Their aggressive attempts to shut down the railway had ended in military violence and the fatal shooting of six strikers. The tragic incident was quickly exploited by rightists in Dakar and Paris to eliminate officials who had encouraged bargaining with African trade unions, and the labor movement remained all but dormant until the end of World War II.¹⁶ Reviving his old union after the war, Gning soon learned that the world of labor had changed for good.

Sarr promised to bring auxiliaries and cadres into a single organization and a single struggle. The union's demands consistently had two dimensions: to equalize benefits for all railwaymen in the cadres with no distinctions of origin or race, and secondly to integrate all auxiliaries into the cadres. The demands were both about equity in compensation and about dignity, especially the dignity of lower-ranking workers. The ultimate demand was for a *cadre unique*, a single hierarchy defined by skill and seniority that would set aside the old distinctions of colonial/metropolitan and cadres/auxiliary.¹⁷

Sarr's other major achievement was to forge a French West Africa-wide

¹⁵ Renseignements, 28 May 1946, K 352 (26); Sene, 'Grève des cheminots', 46. In July, Sarr and his colleagues, still fearing a comeback by Gning, played out an unpleasant little game: they threatened a strike unless the Direction of the railway transferred Gning away from Thiès. The demand was refused, but Sarr was put off by a promise to arrange a meeting with the Governor General and the moment passed. Renseignements, 27 July 1946, 17 G 527.

¹⁶ Iba der Thiam, 'La grève des cheminots du Sénégal de Septembre 1938' (Mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Dakar, 1972).

¹⁷ A month into his tenure, Sarr was criticized at a meeting of auxiliaries for not doing enough for them, and he responded with a meeting to assure them that he was and made the integration of all railwaymen into the *cadre unique* the main theme of his tour of the lines. Renseignements, 27 June, 2 July 1946, 11 D 1/1392. Abdoulaye Souleye Sarr recalled that in the early days lower ranking workers were called *travailleurs indigènes* rather than *cheminots* (interview, 22 July 1990).

movement. The *coup de main* that overthrew Gning had been very much a Thiès-centered event; a mass meeting was its climax. Thiès was a very special kind of place: residence and workplace were thoroughly integrated, and railwaymen from diverse parts of Senegal and the Soudan shared common conditions in this double sense; the bonds formed at Thiès in turn travelled up and down the rail line that ran from Dakar to Bamako. It was not clear at first that the new leaders had support along the line, let alone in the other systems of French West Africa. But within a month of his takeover, Sarr embarked on a series of visits, beginning with the Soudan in June 1946 and culminating in a tour of the other railway lines on the eve of the 1947 strike. He told everyone of his desire to end the distinction between cadres and auxiliaries, pleaded the common cause of the workers against the Federation-wide railway administration, and encouraged the payment of dues and contributions to the strike fund. The union organizations on the different lines brought themselves together as the *Fédération des Syndicats des Cheminots Africains*, and ceded central direction to the *Comité Directeur* of the Dakar-Niger branch, headquartered in Thiès. In February 1947, the Dakar-Niger branch claimed to have added over 700,000 francs to the fund of 92,000 left by the old leadership – it was ready for a test.¹⁸

All this took place against the background of what police reports often called ‘effervescence’ at various points in the West African railway system and in other professions as well. Dakar now seemed a center of calm, and the Governor General attributed this to the success workers had already achieved in that city. Short, localized strikes and strike threats were reported in Dahomey, Guinea and the Ivory Coast.¹⁹ In 1947, in French West Africa as a whole, 164 collective conflicts were reported to the *Inspection du Travail*, although the vast majority was settled without incident and strikes focused on wage disputes. By then, 133 unions in the public sector and 51 in the private had been officially organized. In Dakar, 40 per cent of workers belonged to unions; by the next year, officials believed that 20 per cent of all wage workers in French West Africa had joined a union. The large majority of the unions affiliated to the *Confédération Générale du Travail*

¹⁸ *Syndicat des Travailleurs Africains de la Région Dakar-Niger*, Transcript of *Assemblée Générale* of 9 Feb. 1947, K 459 (179); *Sene*, ‘Grève des cheminots’, 47–50; *Renseignements*, 20 June, 2 July 1946, 11 D 1/1392. The politics of the unions in each line remain to be elucidated, as does the obvious question of why they were willing to cede so much control to Thiès. Some powerful personalities, notably Gaston Fiankan in the Ivory Coast, existed in the different lines. The Federation-wide organization paralleled efforts in the same years of individual trade unions to organize confederations first within each territory, then on the level of French West Africa. The *Confédération Générale du Travail* was the most successful at forging this kind of centralized organization. AOF, *Inspection Générale du Travail*, Annual Reports, 1947, 1948.

¹⁹ Governor General to Minister 20 Apr. and 19 June 1946, 17 G 132; *Renseignements*, Dahomey, June, July, Aug. 1946, and Report of the *Gendarmerie Nationale*, Porto Novo, 13 Aug. and 18 Sept. 1946, K 352 (26); *Renseignements*, Guinea, 1 July 1947, Aug. 1947, and *Gendarmerie Nationale*, Conakry, report, 1, 5 Aug. 1947, K 352(26); *Renseignements*, Soudan, 8 June 1946, 7 July, 3 Aug. 1947, K 352(26); *Chef de la Région Abidjan-Niger to Directeur, Chemins de Fer de l’AOF*, 20 Sept. 1946, 17 G 591; Ivory Coast, *Police et Sûreté*, *Rapport Politique Mensuel*, 3 Oct. 1946, and *Renseignements*, 6 May 1947, 17 G 139; Report of *Commandant du Peloton de Marché d’Abidjan* on strike movement at Tafiré (Korhogo), 16–17 Aug. 1946, 17 G 138.

(CGT), with the African confederation retaining considerable autonomy despite its affiliation with the communist-led, metropolitan organization. But the Fédération Syndicale des Cheminots remained autonomous of any of the central union organizations.²⁰

The other side in the rail dispute was also changing, opening up uncertainty about the status of railwaymen as government employees just as civil servants achieved success in the strike of 1946. The railways had been under the Direction des Travaux Publics. Effective 17 July 1946, they were reorganized as the Régie des Chemins de Fer de l'Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), which would today be called a parastatal organization and which was described at the time as an 'organization of public utility attached to the private sector and constrained to rules of industrial and commercial operations'. It was administered by a director, M. Cunéo, who reported to a Conseil d'Administration chaired by the Secretary General of the Government General and consisting of 16 members appointed by the administration, eight representatives of the Grand Conseil (the elected legislative body of French West Africa), five representatives of the workers (of whom three were named by the unions), and three representatives of the users of railway services. The board was autonomous in its position, but not in its majority membership, while the status of the Régie implied that its own financial condition – and not the resources of the Government General, or by extension, France – constrained its expenditures. The reorganization meant that railway workers would no longer benefit from a *statut*, as did civil servants, but would come under a *convention collective*, like the metal workers, the bakery workers or commercial workers. Railway workers could not automatically claim the gains acquired by the civil service, and railway officials had an excuse for not responding to political pressure. The Régie became a distinct battleground, consistent with the government's overall strategy of regaining initiative after the unified mobilization it had faced in the general strike of 1946.²¹

The Régie's personnel was organized hierarchically, in a manner parallel to the bureaucracy: the *cadre supérieur* was entirely European, the *cadre commun supérieur* mostly so. The *cadre secondaire* was mixed and the *cadre local* was, essentially, African. All the cadres were either housed or received equivalent indemnities; the indemnities of zone and for family charges were highly skewed toward the superior, largely European, cadres. But most important, the auxiliaries did not receive housing or indemnities; they could be fired for minor offences; they were in many respects treated like temporary workers even though most served for years. And they were the large majority of railway personnel. In 1946, the railway employed 478

²⁰ AOF, Inspection Générale du Travail (IGT), Annual Report, 1947, 56–9; *ibid.*, 1948, 83. One reason the railwaymen shied away from the CGT or other *centrales* was that white railwaymen were mostly in the CGT, and their overt racism and unwillingness to make common cause with Africans was not a strong advertisement for solidarity. Jean Suret-Canale, 'The French West African railway workers' strike, 1947–48', in Robin Cohen, Jean Copans and Peter C. W. Gutkind (eds.), *African Labor History* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1978), 152, n. 8.

²¹ AOF, IGT, Annual Report, 1947, 60–1; Sene, 'Grève des cheminots', 16. The importance to strikers of the *statut* issue was emphasized by Mansour Niang (interview 4 Aug. 1994).

Europeans and 1,729 Africans in the various cadres, plus 15,726 auxiliaries.²² This structure was very difficult to defend in principle – but useful in practice, especially given the precedent set by government cadres in 1946. Government officials, however, did see that a more coherent structure might offer possibilities of reducing the staffing level of the railway. The direction of the railway agreed: they wanted a smaller and more efficient staff – realizing that the days of the derisorily paid multitude were ending – and they wanted the unions to co-operate.²³ There was room for bargaining.

In August 1946 the *Fédération des Travailleurs Africains* submitted its demands for a *cadre unique* and for the integration, over time, of the permanently employed auxiliaries into the cadre. The Governor General, under current labor law, appointed a *Commission Paritaire*, in which representatives of the two sides discussed the issues dividing them. Between December and April, twenty rounds of bargaining were held, most of them ‘confused, tedious, broken up by stormy discussions’. Unions representing European workers made the procedures more divisive by their overt defense of racial privilege and rejection of the *cadre unique*. In April 1947, the African union, its demands unmet, staged a theatrical coup: it withdrew from the *Commission Paritaire* and staged a strike at the moment when the President of France and the Colonial Minister – Marius Moutet – were visiting Senegal.²⁴

The three-day strike – throughout French West Africa – was a brilliant maneuver, and it appeared to have worked.²⁵ Under the pressure of Moutet’s presence – as well as that of Governor General Barthes, Lamine Gueye, Léopold Senghor, and other luminaries – the parties agreed on the necessity to create a *cadre unique*, but also to reduce the staffing level of the railway, with the layoffs to be worked out by another *Commission Paritaire* which would consider seniority and skill. The creation of the *cadre unique* would require working out a table of equivalencies, so that people would be slotted into the correct positions.²⁶

²² AOF, Direction Générale des Travaux Publics, Direction des Chemins de Fer et Transports, Annual Report, 1946, quoted in Suret-Canale, ‘Railway workers’ strike’, 152, n. 5.

²³ This was precisely the kind of thinking that emerged from the 1946 general strike. Cooper, ‘The Senegalese General Strike’.

²⁴ Inspecteur Général du Travail, ‘La Grève des Cheminots de l’AOF (1/10/47–16/3/48)’, IGT 13/2; AOF, IGT, Annual Report, 1947, 60; Renseignements, 19 Aug. 1946, 11 D 1/1392; Suret-Canale, ‘Railway workers’ strike’, 134–5. Sarr, in explaining the withdrawal from the Commission, told an assembly of workers on 9 February, ‘The “toubabs”, in perfect unity, lined up against us in the Commission Paritaire’. He and others complained of the racist comments continuously made by representatives of European workers in the commission, and warned of ‘a battle with the Europeans’. The latter phrase was used by Mody Camara. Renseignements, 1, 10 Feb. 1947, K 377 (26).

²⁵ Police spies reported on a series of meetings at Thiès in early April at which the strike was planned: leaders calculated that high officials would accept union claims to avoid the embarrassment of having their President witness an ongoing strike. There were also rumors that 3,000 Africans were about to lose their jobs, and the strike thus had a defensive element to it. Renseignements, 11, 13 Apr. 1947, and Gendarmerie Nationale, Thiès, Rapport, 14 Apr. 1947, K 377 (26). For reports on the strike, see telegrams from the Governors of Dahomey, the Ivory Coast, Guinea and the Soudan, 20–23 Apr. 1947, *ibid.*

²⁶ Protocole de fin de grève, 19 Apr. 1947, K 377 (26).

The acceptance of this protocol suggests that the highest levels of the government were unwilling to contest the principle of the *cadre unique* and the integration of auxiliaries. They did not want to defend overtly the discriminatory structure of a colonial labor force against the universalistic claim to equality among all workers. In April, the most far-reaching issue seemed theoretically solved. The issues over which the October strike was to be fought were less than earthshaking; the Director of the Régie later referred to them as 'points of detail'.²⁷ The real issue was power: who was to control the process by which new modalities of labor organization would be worked out?

In the months after April, two developments took place. The worsening economic situation in metropolitan and overseas France led to a renewed attempt by officials to hold down prices and wages throughout the French domains, the first attempt in Africa having failed during the 1946 strike. In late April and May, Governors General were told to avoid a 'general readjustment of wages of a profession'. Despite fears of renewed general strikes, officials on the scene had to push for restraint.²⁸ The wages of railwaymen were a major factor in the cost of goods exported and imported. In August, the railway claimed that its 1947 budget was in the red and that the integration of around 2,000 auxiliaries into the cadre would more than triple the deficit and require a 130 per cent increase in railway rates in order to bring it back to equilibrium, in lieu of which a subsidy from the government would have to be forthcoming.²⁹

Secondly, in May 1947, the coalition governing France changed. The Communist Party was formally expelled, and a Center-Left coalition took power, although Moutet remained Colonial Minister until November. This meant that certain kinds of debates and certain kinds of compromises did not have to take place within the French government. The new Cabinet did not overtly reverse past labor or imperial policy – it remained committed to rationalizing the workplace and working for a Code du Travail – but it was more open to other sorts of imperatives. In metropolitan France, a bitter railway strike promptly ensued.³⁰

Although the Conseil d'Administration of the Régie des Chemins de Fer overlapped in membership and personnel with the Commission Paritaire that had negotiated the agreement of April, it voted in August to reject the accord. This kind of contradiction was in fact part of what the creation of the Régie was all about: government-appointed members put on their parastatal hats, pleaded autonomy and fiscal accountability, and sent the agreement into limbo.³¹

For the union, this was nothing less than a betrayal. By summer's end, Sarr was mobilizing forces for a strike, and angry workers were even

²⁷ Note sur la proposition de loi présentée par M Mamadou Konaté tendant à la création d'un cadre unique des chemins de fer de l'AOF, incl. Cunéo to Governor General 30 Mar. 1950, K 43(1).

²⁸ Circular signed by Secretary General Marat (for Minister) to Hauts Commissaires, 29 Apr. 1947. For warnings of a general strike, see Inspecteur du Travail Combier (Senegal), Note d'étude, 17 Apr. 1947, and letter to Secretary General, 13 May 1947, IGT 13/4. ²⁹ Note sur l'équilibre financier de la Régie, 12 Aug. 1947, K 459 (179).

³⁰ Marie-Renée Valentin, 'Les grèves des cheminots français au cours de l'année 1947', *Le Mouvement Social*, cxxx (1985), 55-80. ³¹ Sene, 'Grève des cheminots', 55-7.

criticizing him for not doing so forcefully enough.³² They had to cross muddied waters to define issues: the call for a *cadre unique* was a dramatic demand for equal conditions of work – linking the feelings of workers who experienced racial discrimination on a daily basis with the assimilationist rhetoric of the French state – but the other side responded by both accepting and rejecting the *cadre unique*. The union's demand that railwaymen of all ranks be paid the indemnity of zone (the supplement to wages intended to offset geographical differences in cost of living) at the same rate rather than at rates favoring the top ranks was met not with denial but with claims that perhaps the indemnity of zone was a bad idea and should be eliminated for all workers.³³ The issue of integrating auxiliaries into the cadres was not contested either, but issues of effective dates and the standards for integration (general versus selective) were pressed by the Régie.³⁴ Officially, the disputed issues boiled down to: the effective date for integrating auxiliaries into the cadres; how workers were to be reclassified in forming the *cadre unique*; where examination barriers were to be set for promotions; conditions for leaves; which employees would receive housing; and whether the indemnity of zone would be uniform or would depend on rank.

At the beginning of September, Sarr told an assembly at Thiès that 'The colonialist spirit of the Europeans has once again revealed to us its force'. He explained the detailed issues in dispute. With unanimous agreement, a strike date was set for 10 October. He persuaded proponents of an immediate strike that it was first necessary to make the rounds of the railway depots – including the Ivory Coast, Guinea and Dahomey – and he soon set off on his journey. The Ivoirien union leader, Gaston Fiankan, declared that the Abidjan-Niger region would join the Dakar-Niger in the strike, and he was soon holding meetings in various locations in the Ivory Coast to consolidate support. As Sarr went off to proselytize the Soudan, French security reported 'Up to now, he is getting confidence and unanimity for the strike along the entire line'. Returning from the Soudan, Sarr appeared before another assembly at Thiès attended by, according to police, 7,000 people. Awaiting him, the crowd beat drums, engaged in 'wild dances' and waved three big French flags. He was escorted to the meeting by cyclists and arrived amidst cries of 'Vive Sarr'.³⁵

Just before the strike deadline – on October 7 by one account – Léopold Senghor came to Thiès to meet in private with the Comité Directeur. He told them he was with them in their struggle. Lamine Gueye, meanwhile, already had a strained relationship with the current union leadership and had had an ugly confrontation in Thiès with the 'Jeunes' when he tried to reconcile

³² Renseignements, 25 Aug. 1947, K 377 (26).

³³ Governor General to Minister, 28 June, 16 Sept. 1947, K 459 (179). This indemnity could rise as high as 7/10 of the base wage; it was a *de facto* mechanism for equalizing base wages while maintaining substantial inequalities. The Governor General claimed to be thinking about suppressing this for civil servants – which would set a precedent, although technically no more than that, for railway workers – and replacing it with an indemnity of residence which would apply only to high-cost areas and apply without distinction of rank or origin. The Governor General, however, feared that opening up this issue raised the possibility of a general strike throughout the civil service and railways.

³⁴ Mémoire of Régie for the Comité Arbitral, 27 Oct. 1947, K 459 (179).

³⁵ Renseignements, Thiès, 1, 11 Sept. 1947, and Renseignements, Ivory Coast, 16, 18 Sept., 1947, K 377 (26); Sûreté, Synthèse mensuelle, Oct. 1947, 17 G 527.

them with Gning after Sarr's coup in the railway union. Gueye, according to informants, was willing to talk to the union leaders, but he warned them of the dangers of a strike rather than giving his support. The strikers would remember the difference, even though Senghor failed to back the strikers publicly as he had in private.³⁶

The Governor General talked to the union leaders on the eve of the strike and tried to intimidate them. The Inspection du Travail made a last ditch attempt at conciliation. The union felt it had fulfilled all the preconditions for a legal strike by virtue of the fact that it had been jumping through hoops for over a year; officials claimed that these were not the hoops prescribed by law and that the dispute should go to arbitration over the listed items in dispute. An arbitrator and the arbitration appeal panel eventually did hear the case and made their rulings later in the month. This action was too little, too late, and without waiting for the hearing, the union began its strike as planned on 10 October throughout all branches of the railway in French West Africa and on the wharfs in Dahomey and the Ivory Coast under the Régie's jurisdiction. The walkout was virtually complete among the 17,000 railwaymen and 2,000 workers at the wharfs, and it remained that way: on 1 November, 38 Africans were on the job.³⁷

SOLIDARITY AND SURVIVAL

Reading police reports – several per day during the five and a half months of the strike – reveals some of its remarkable features: the union's largely successful attempt to preserve unity until January, when the Abidjan-Niger region defected, but the other regions held solid; the fear of the administration that the hiring of strikebreakers or other repressive measures would provoke reactions which it could not control, and its delay for a month before it tried – with only marginal success – to reconstitute a work force and increase traffic; the slowness of African politicians and political parties – and the new institutions of the Union Française – to take cognizance of this act of enormous political and economic importance until the strike was three months old; and the way in which the struggle, as it wore on, became more and more about the strike itself, and its ending reflected the fact that each side had proved its toughness and was ready for the next round – and the next form – of contestation.³⁸

The most fascinating question about the conduct of the strike – how such a large and diverse body of workers maintained themselves physically and as a coherent force – requires further investigation. Asked this question, informants stress solidarity within the railway community, connections to farmers, merchants and others in a position to help, and good preparation by

³⁶ I have not seen any mention of the meeting with Senghor in the archives – apparently the police spies missed this one. It was reported independently by two knowledgeable informants in Thiès, Amadou Bouta Gueye and Oumar NDiaye (interviews, 9 Aug. 1994). It is conceivable that the railway union's later support for Senghor is being pushed backwards, but these informants (both *délégués du personnel* at the time) are quite specific about this meeting. On Gueye's clash with the Union des Jeunes, see *Renseignements*, 27 May 1946, 11 D 1/1392.

³⁷ Governor General to Minister, 11 Oct. 1947, IGT 13/2; AOF, IGT, Annual Report, 1947, 62.

³⁸ For a narrative approach to the strike, see Sene, 'Grève des cheminots'.

the union itself (see below). The question obviously puzzled officials – who were predicting the strike's imminent collapse from its first days to its final months – and the most perspicacious official accounts reached a surprising and frightening conclusion.

The security services gradually learned that railwaymen had a complex web of affiliation within the communities in which they lived. A police spy overheard reports to a meeting at Thiès of a strike official's tour of Senegalese depot towns: at Kaolack a 'humble cultivator gives us 400F'; at Tambacounda, the merchant El Hadj Abou Sy gave sheep to the railwaymen, and local notables, marabouts and merchants offered 20,000 francs and ten tons of millet; at Guinguinéo investigation of a rumor that the marabouts were hostile to the strike proved false, and the strikers' emissary found that the entire population 'is with us with no reserve'.³⁹ In fact, the leading marabouts of the Islamic confraternities of Senegal – who were close to the administration – used their influence against the strike but closer to ground level the religious organization seems to have been more supportive.⁴⁰ Informants claim that marabouts would not support the strike in public but that many were either supportive or neutral in private.⁴¹

Other reports suggested that merchants in Senegal played a particularly important role in providing assistance, in the form of money, food and trucks to transport food. This was particularly so in Thiès where the health of almost the entire business community depended on the custom of railwaymen.⁴² The newspaper *L'AOF*, read by many *évolués*, publicized a collection drive to benefit railwaymen: it reached 134,615 francs in late November and 454,555 by mid-December.⁴³ The union, according to an informant, channelled its strike funds to men with families, figuring that single men could improvise more easily.⁴⁴

In Abidjan, the Ivory Coast railway union issued an 'Appeal to Africans' in late October and asked 'all black associations' to provide material aid. In November, the union was providing 300 francs to any needy striker who asked for it. 200,000 francs had been paid out in Abidjan, 100,000 each at

³⁹ Renseignements, 19 Nov. 1947, K 378 (26).

⁴⁰ The Grand Marabout of Tivaouane, Ababacar Sy, told a religious meeting in January 1948, 'France is good and generous', and workers would get satisfaction only if they politely asked their employers after having accomplished their tasks. 'God the all-powerful has said he will never help his "slave" who, in demanding things impolitely and with hatred, puts forward his desire to possess'. Renseignements, 26 Jan. 1948, K 379 (26). The powerful marabout Seydou Nourou Tall also worked against the strike. Renseignements, 29 Oct. 1947, K 457 (179).

⁴¹ Of the leading marabouts, Cheikh Mbacke is mentioned as having been supportive, but the tolerance of lower level marabouts is what was stressed most in interviews. Informants stressed their personal acquaintance with marabouts at the time. Oumar NDiaye and Amadou Bouta Gueye (interviews, 9 Aug. 1994) and Mansour Niang (interview, 4 Aug. 1994).

⁴² Renseignements, 14 Nov. 1947, K 457 (179). A list of donors published in *Réveil*, 20 Nov. 1947, also listed a number of local politicians, merchants and union groups in railway towns such as Diourbel and Kaolack, as well as Dakar and Thiès. Informants noted the importance of merchants' help: Oumar NDiaye and Amadou Bouta Gueye (interviews, 9 Aug. 1994), Mansour Niang (interview, 4 Aug. 1994).

⁴³ *L'AOF*, 25 Nov., 12 Dec. 1947. The newspaper gave considerable coverage to the strike, although its patron, Lamine Gueye, took a hands-off position throughout its course.

⁴⁴ Oumar NDiaye (interview, 9 Aug. 1994).

Port-Bouet, Grand-Bassam, Agboville and Dimbokro.⁴⁵ Such support was not unanimous – some citizens of Abidjan refused to donate because the strike had deprived them of meat – but it was substantial.⁴⁶ At Conakry, in Guinea, the union appealed to Lebanese shop-owners and African civil servants. According to the police, ‘The majority of merchants and civil servants (Customs, post and telephone, auxiliary doctors) have contributed sums between 300 and 500 francs’.⁴⁷ In Dahomey, the Inspection du Travail thought that the mass did not look favorably on the strikers but they nonetheless were receiving ‘loans of considerable magnitude for their strike fund, coming not only from notables or autochthonous groups, but also from certain Europeans’. The Governor thought that the *évolués* were supportive because the claims for equal indemnities with Europeans struck a chord with them.⁴⁸

Railwaymen did a great deal themselves to organize food provisions. Most workers had not cut themselves off from their rural roots. They had family members who farmed and could either provide a place for strikers to return to or directly supply them with grain or fish. Interviews in 1990 and 1994 underscored the importance of the family mechanism in sustaining the strikers.⁴⁹ Union leaders told many workers to return to their villages to reduce the burden for feeding those who remained in the depot towns. Near the smaller stations along the lines, railwaymen sometimes had their own fields and could devote their energies to growing their food as the strike wore on.⁵⁰

Women clearly played a major role in the strike, although one female informant distinguished between their participation in the violent strike of 1938 – where she and other women passed stones to male strikers who threw them at police and strikebreakers – and their role in the non-violent, carefully controlled strike of 1947. Testimonies so far collected stress the role of women within family units – their efforts to find food, their work in market-selling or other non-wage activities to sustain family income.⁵¹ They composed songs supporting the strike and its leaders and taunted strike breakers: their position in railway communities created an atmosphere where *défaillants* (strike breakers) would not want to live. This is a subject which requires further investigation, but it appears less likely that women acted as

⁴⁵ Renseignements, 31 Oct., 7 Nov. 1947, K 379 (26).

⁴⁶ Renseignements, 10 Nov. 1947, K 379 (26).

⁴⁷ Renseignements, Coyah, 20 Dec. 1947, K 379 (26).

⁴⁸ Inspection du Travail, Dahomey, to IGT, 4 Nov. 1947, K 457 (179).

⁴⁹ Abdoulaye Souleye Sarr (interview, 22 July 1990), Amadou Bouta Gueye and Oumar Ndiaye (interview, 9 Aug. 1994), Mansour Niang (interview, 4 Aug. 1994).

⁵⁰ Renseignements, Thiès, 4 Dec. 1947, and Ivory Coast, 9 Nov. 1947, K379 (26); IGT, AOF (Pierre Pélisson), Report on Strike, 24 Jan. 1948, IGT, 13/2; Abdoulaye Souleye Sarr, (interview, 22 July 1990).

⁵¹ Khady Dia, who sold peanuts by the Thiès train station, compared the role of women in the two strikes. Interview, Thiès, 9 Aug. 1994, by Aminata Diena, Alioune Ba, Oumar Gueye and Frederick Cooper. Abdoulaye Souleye Sarr (interview, 22 July 1990), Oumar NDiaye and Amadou Bouta Gueye (interviews, 9 Aug. 1994) also suggested that Sembene may have elided the role of women in the two strikes. Informants call the 1938 strike ‘la grève de Diack’, after its leader Cheik Diack, while the 1947–8 strike is known as ‘la grève de Sarr’. All informants stress the importance of women’s efforts to sustain families during the long strike.

a distinct entity – let alone that such an entity was led by someone from the margins of Muslim society like Sembene's character Penda – than that they acted as parts of families and communities. Sembene's women's march is absent from oral testimonies and the police record. It remains to be seen how much their actions in turn affected the way these structures operated and altered the meanings of gender within laboring communities, as well as the extent to which the increasing value and security of male wage packets changed power relations within households.⁵²

The union itself had realized in its preparations for the strike that the supply question would be crucial. There already existed a *co-operative indigène* headquartered at Thiès and Bamako, which constituted a kind of bulk-buying organization for railway workers. On the eve of the strike, the co-operative leaders, close to the union leadership, had stocked their stores. The strike – not by coincidence – occurred at the end of the harvest season when supplies were at their best. During the strike, the co-operative supplied food and other necessities to strikers on credit – afterward officials reported the co-operative 1,560,000 francs in debt for food delivered before or during the strike. 'During the entire strike the co-operative sustained you', appealed Sarr to union members as he tried to raise money to pay off the debt.⁵³ A strike committee official boasted to a meeting at Thiès, with a dig at the marabouts of the Mouride brotherhood, about the work of the co-operative: 'Now ... that we have assured our supplies and have for certain a little money, we are like the 'Cheikh Mourides' [Mouride marabouts]; we do not work but we have our provisions; we thus have people who work for us, it is Allah who is with us'.⁵⁴

In January, three months into the strike, Pierre Pélisson, the head of the Inspection du Travail in French West Africa, reached a startling conclusion about the ability of Africans to conduct a long strike: 'Here the means of defense are very different – and singularly more effective – than in the case of metropolitan strikes because the roots of the labor force are deeper and its

⁵² It is hardly likely that the extensive network of police spies would have missed a public event like a march of women from Thiès to Dakar. Sembene's account was specifically denied by Abdoulaye Souleye Sarr (interview, 22 July 1990) and Amadou Bouta Gueye (interview, 9 Aug. 1994), and contradicted by Khady Dia (interview, 9 Aug. 1994). There is a report from December 1947 that when eight workers decided to return to work at Thiès 'a band of women and children gathered in front of their (the returnees') homes and began to insult and threaten them', so that the ex-strikers had to wait for the police to disperse the crowd before reporting to work. Gendarmerie Nationale, Thiès, Report, 23 Dec. 1947, K 379 (26). See also Sene, 'Grève des cheminots', 91, who cites an interview with Mame Fatou Diop, on the importance of songs and the taunting of strike breakers. For a literary analysis of women in Sembene's novel, see F. Case, 'Workers' movements: revolution and women's consciousness in *God's Bits of Wood*', *Can. J. of Afr. Studies*, xv (1981), 277–92.

⁵³ Renseignements, Thiès, 26 Oct. 1947, K 43 (1); Renseignements, Thiès, 17 Sept. 1948, 5 Aug. 1949, 11 D 1/1392; Abdoulaye Souleye Sarr (interview, 22 July 1990); Jacques Ibrahima Gaye, article in *L'AOF*, 17 Oct. 1947, clipping in K 457 (179).

⁵⁴ N'Diaye Sidya, quoted in Renseignements, 29 Oct. 1947, K 457 (179). Food supply became part of the struggle between the two sides. The co-operative supplied food only to strikers, not to railwaymen who went back to work, and officials thought this a major reason why few workers went back to work on the Dakar-Niger. The Régie tried itself to organize the delivery of rice from the Soudan to railwaymen at Thiès and Dakar who went back to work. IGT, AOF, to Deputy Dumas, 6 Jan. 1948, K457 (179).

needs less imperious in Africa than in Europe'.⁵⁵ Pélisson had been taught an important lesson: the degree of proletarianization was not an accurate measure of the power of strikers, and the success of the strike lay in the integration of the strikers into the strikers' own communities.

PROLETARIANS, POLITICIANS AND MOBILIZATION BEYOND THE
RAILWAY

It was in regard to other proletarians that the solidarity of the strike movement was the most ambiguous. Pélisson noticed this too, writing that most wage workers outside the railway distanced themselves from railwaymen, and the latter 'have not benefited from their effective support but only from habitual demonstrations of sympathy'. In Dakar, wage workers were in the midst of peaceful negotiations over another round of wage revisions; no general strike movement emerged in support of the railwaymen.⁵⁶

At times, it looked as if the solidarity of the railwaymen would take on an even wider dimension. In early November the Commission Administrative of the Union des Syndicats de Dakar discussed what to do to support the strikers. The leading veterans of the 1946 strike, Abbas Gueye and Lamine Diallo, tried to convince a 'reticent assembly' of the need for a general strike. They pointed out to civil servants in particular that they shared a fundamental interest in a unified indemnity of zone. But other speakers pushed for 'more moderate' approaches, such as protest meetings, collections of funds and delegations to the Governor General, and it was the latter position which prevailed.⁵⁷ In Guinea, the Union Régionale Syndicale de Guinée passed a motion of support for the railwaymen, 'whose demands were theirs as well'. But there was no common action for the common demands.⁵⁸ In the Ivory Coast in November, the Union Locale des Syndicats, affiliated to the CGT, decided 'that it could not support the action of the railway union because [it was] not affiliated to the CGT'.⁵⁹ Around that time, some civil service unions were thinking about a general strike, but they would not act until they heard from the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain and its leader Houphouët-Boigny. They were to get no encouragement from him.⁶⁰

The trade union movement, in West Africa and in France, did better by the railwaymen in a financial sense. CGT unions in the region contributed, according to a French CGT source, about two million francs. The National Solidarity Committee of the CGT in France gave 500,000, while other contributions came from French railway unions and another CGT bureau. The RDA in the Ivory Coast gave 350,000 – although its support became increasingly suspect.⁶¹

What other unions and political parties did not do was organize sympathy strikes, stage large demonstrations or otherwise try to turn the strike into a wider social and political movement. The lack of common action is all the more notable because there was considerable trade union anger at the time

⁵⁵ IGT, Report, 24 Jan. 1948, IGT 13/2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Report of meeting, 4 Nov. 1947, K 379 (26); Renseignements, 7 Nov. 1947, K 457 (179).

⁵⁸ Resolution of Union Régionale de Guinée, 18 Nov. 1947, K 379 (26).

⁵⁹ Governor, Ivory Coast, to Governor General, 21 Nov. 1947, K 237 (26).

⁶⁰ Renseignements, Ivory Coast, 9 Nov. 1947, K 379 (26).

⁶¹ Suret-Canale, 'Railway workers' strike', 147.

of the strike over the withdrawal by a new Minister of Overseas France of a Code du Travail which Moutet had tried to implement by decree just before he left office in November 1947.⁶² But the causes never were linked, the Code protests fizzled, and the Code debate disappeared into French political institutions for another five years.

Some trade unionists in Senegal were reluctant to lend their support to railway workers in 1947 because railwaymen had not helped them during the general strike of 1946. Moreover, the civil service, metal trades, commerce and industry unions were now engaged in regular negotiations through institutions set up as a result of that strike. As the annual reports of the Inspection du Travail make clear, the 1947–8 railway strike stands out in both years, during which disputes were narrowly focused and easily contained within existing negotiating frameworks. The fact that most of the concessions made to civil servants in Dakar were extended to other parts of French West Africa, and the spread of Dakar-type agreements to other key businesses in West Africa changed the politics of labor on a wide scale. Focusing the labor question on union-management relations within each branch of industry, commerce or government and making workers less inclined toward another venture in solidarity had been the Inspection's strategy since January 1946, and Pélisson recognized even in the midst of the railway strike that the strategy was working.⁶³

The relationship of the railwaymen to organized politics was equally ambiguous. The RDA, which like the railway crossed territorial borders, maintained its distance. In the run up to the strike, Sûreté thought that the RDA was fighting against the strike call, hoping that its failure would lead to Sarr's ouster and open up the autonomous union to takeover by pro-RDA leaders.⁶⁴ In February 1948, the *Voix de la RDA*, published in Dakar, saw fit to rebut a charge that the strike had been called by the RDA by writing, 'Sarr, the federal secretary of the railway union, whose courage and combativity we admire, is not RDA'. The newspaper insisted that it respected 'trade union independence', and that while it agreed with the demands of the union, 'We had the courage to declare to the railwaymen: on the local level we could do nothing. It was the business of the railwaymen and only the railwaymen to take up their responsibilities'. It claimed that the RDA had tried in the metropole to bring pressure on the government to settle the strike and blamed its opponents for the failure of that initiative.⁶⁵

This article probably represented the view of the RDA leadership in

⁶² At the Grand Conseil, Senghor noted the 'emotion the suspension of the application of the Code du Travail raised among workers' and urged legislative action. *Bulletin du Grand Conseil*, 29 Jan. 1948, 277–8. See also *Renseignements*, 19, 28 Jan. 1948, K 439 (179); Directeur des Affaires Politiques, Note pour M. le Ministre, 20 Dec. 1947, AP 2255/1. For more on the Code, see Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*, forthcoming ch. 7.

⁶³ IGT, Report, 24 Jan. 1948, IGT 13/2. The 1948 Annual Report of the Inspection du Travail for French West Africa (90) termed the railway strike 'the only important collective conflict' of the year. It claimed credit for the 'favorable evolution' of the situation. There were many more disputes registered with the Inspection in 1947, but they had not led to many serious strikes, a fact for which the Inspection also took credit. *Ibid.* 1947, 59.

⁶⁴ *Renseignements*, 1 Sept. 1947, K 377 (26).

⁶⁵ *La Voix de la RDA* was published regularly as a special section of the *communisant* Dakar newspaper, *Réveil*. This article appeared in no. 283, 5 Feb. 1948.

Dakar. The leading light of the party, Houphouët-Boigny was playing a more complicated game. Security officials kept hearing reports of Houphouët-Boigny's covert opposition to the strike. In early November, they reported he had told the strike committee 'that the deputies from French West Africa had not been consulted before the breaking out of this strike, inopportune at this time of year, and that as a result he was not going to be mixed up in their affair'. Two weeks later, security reported, 'In his house, last Sunday, the deputy Houphouët had said to his friends that the strikers have not acted skillfully, that they should have accepted the advantages conceded in the course of this strike, gone back to work in order to renew their demands later and obtain the "full rate" (the full indemnity of zone) by successive steps'. At that point, he said he would go to Dakar to see what he could do.⁶⁶

In Dakar he sang a different tune. Houphouët-Boigny told a meeting called by the Union des Syndicats Confédérés de l'AOF on 7 December that he and his RDA colleague Gabriel d'Arboussier pledged support to the railwaymen 'in their struggle against colonialism' and assured them of the 'presence of the RDA beside you to defend their demands which are legitimate'. The pro-RDA newspaper *Réveil* noted the absence at this meeting of the parliamentarians from Senegal (who were not RDA).⁶⁷

But by this time most of the West African parliamentarians, Houphouët-Boigny included, were pursuing a goal which, however worthy, was not quite the same as the anti-colonialist rhetoric implied. At the time of the union meeting, Houphouët-Boigny and other deputies were in Dakar for the December-January meeting of the Grand Conseil de l'AOF, French West Africa's major deliberative body. They took advantage of their collective presence in Dakar to talk to leading officials and to try to persuade the Governor General to intervene. Houphouët-Boigny and his rival counselor, Lamine Gueye, both told Pélisson of 'their concern not to mix politics with an affair that must remain strictly professional and simply to bring their purely obliging support to settling a conflict whose importance to the country is considerable'.⁶⁸ The parliamentarians told both the Inspecteur Général du Travail and the Governor General that their concern was to end the strike 'so prejudicial to the economy of the country as well as to the interests of the Régie and of the railwaymen themselves'. They were rebuffed by Governor General Barthes, who refused to call into question the October ruling of the arbitrators.⁶⁹ But in any case, these interventions show the tone of the politicians two months into the strike: a sentiment of regret over the hardships caused by the strike and hope for a quick settlement, but an evasiveness about the substantive issues and an unwillingness to support the strikers unambiguously and publicly.

Houphouët-Boigny reported the meetings to the Grand Conseil, but the effort of some members to debate the strike failed, as its president, Lamine Gueye, claimed the Conseil had no say on such a matter. Gueye went on to distance himself from the strikers, noting that while the interests of the railwaymen were affected by the strike, 'those of the entire country are as

⁶⁶ Renseignements, Ivory Coast, 5, 18 Nov. 1947, K 379 (26).

⁶⁷ *Réveil*, no. 268 (15 Dec. 1947) and no. 269 (18 Dec. 1947).

⁶⁸ IGT to Governor General, 12 Dec. 1947, K 457 (179). ⁶⁹ *Ibid.* IGT 13/2.

well'. At a subsequent session in January, a counselor from Dahomey, Apithy, introduced a resolution asking for a delegation of the Conseil to try to get the government to intervene and attacked Lamine Gueye for failing to act. But this merely led to a brief and bitter exchange of accusations between RDA and Socialist deputies. Several delegates opposed intervention on the grounds that the Conseil did not have jurisdiction. Senghor said contacts had been made with the incoming Governor General, whose presence would raise the possibility of compromise in this 'painful conflict'. He added, 'The role of Grand Counselors is not to have a partisan debate here or to tear each other up and thus to tear up Africa, but to study the technical means to bring a solution to the conflict'. Apithy withdrew his resolution. French West Africa's most powerful political actors had failed even to express a collective opinion on the most salient issue of the day.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, Houphouët-Boigny was doing his bit to end the strike in his home territory. The railwaymen of the Ivory Coast broke ranks in early January and gave up the strike. Pélisson wrote, 'According to our information, this result is due to M. the Deputy Houphouët who succeeded in persuading the African railwaymen to return to work despite the counter-propaganda of M. Sarr'.⁷¹ The police reports from the Ivory Coast (see below) reveal a pattern of intrigue in January which resulted in the union's defection; Houphouët-Boigny's influence on some members of the union leadership – although not its leader, Gaston Fiankan – may well have been crucial. None of this should be surprising: the Ivoirien branch of the RDA had emerged from a group of cocoa planters and was rapidly expanding its power in agriculture as much as in politics. The harvest-time strike obviously affected their prospects with particular acuity.

Senghor was among the deputies who joined the settlement initiative in December and January. He was the only major political figure at the time to have given some indication of support – if only in private – to the strikers and he remained in contact. Senghor sent a letter to the minister, enclosing a list of demands of the union as well as a 'History of the Situation' written by Sarr. His own interpretation was truly Senghorian: 'In any case, the claims relative to the suppression of racial discrimination seem to me to be well founded, even if one can dispute the wage rates. In effect, one cannot speak of a *cadre unique* if there is discrimination within the interior of the cadre, discrimination which is moreover condemned by the Constitution of the IVth Republic'. He appealed for a settlement not on the basis of the April accords, but on the 'spirit of the Constitution of the IVth Republic which proclaims that the Union Française is a union founded on the equality of rights and duties, without discrimination based on race or religion'. Avoiding

⁷⁰ AOF, Bulletin du Grand Conseil, Procès-Verbal, 23 Dec. 1947, 80–1, 31 Jan. 1948, 320–1. The assembly of the Union Française – the deliberative (but nearly powerless) body intended to allow full discussion of issues facing Overseas France among colonial and metropolitan deputies – had a longer debate on the strike, ending in a resolution calling on the administration to 'resolve' the conflict and not to sanction the strikers. The debate is nonetheless notable for the invocation by supporters of the strikers of images of France's unity, on its progressive role in the world, and on the importance of equality within it to justify favorable treatment for African railwaymen. Débats, Sessions of 6, 12 Feb. 1948, 69–74, 78–89.

⁷¹ Pélisson to M le Député Dumas, 6 Jan. 1948, IGT 13/2.

the mundane complexities of a labor dispute, Senghor defined the issue as one of constitutional principles and racial equality.⁷²

By then, the *Comité Directeur* of the union had already criticized both Senghor and Lamine Gueye 'for having placed themselves on the side of the Administration and for their support of Cunéo'.⁷³ When the December discussions among parliamentarians assembled for the *Grand Conseil* meeting and the meetings with the Governor General got nowhere, Fily Dabo Sissoko, deputy from the Soudan, began to intervene as well.⁷⁴ Since the Soudanais railwaymen were crucial to the Dakar-Niger branch, officials hoped that he would have sufficient influence to get one group of workers to give up the strike in exchange only for promises that Sissoko would use his good offices on the union's behalf after railwaymen returned to work. Sissoko and his allies told officials that the Soudanais railwaymen had 'total confidence' in the Deputy of the Soudan, and that his intervention would insure that 'the Soudanais will detach themselves from the Senegalese and it is certain that overall movements similar to the strike of 11 October will not recur'.⁷⁵ Sissoko suggested token concessions, such as changing the date on which auxiliaries would acquire permanent status, but the real message was 'about the influence that the Deputy Fily Dabo Sissoko could have on the end of the strike'.⁷⁶ The *Régie* agreed to the date change, insisting that this promise 'is made to you and you alone to help you in your good offices to bring about an effective return to work and would only apply if the return occurred on the date indicated'.⁷⁷

Sissoko talked directly with Sarr, who was frightened of the potential split in the strike movement within the Dakar-Niger. But the *Comité Directeur* would have none of this: they interpreted the offer as a 'word game' and as 'sabotage'. Sarr was instructed on 29 January 1948 to reject Sissoko's initiatives: 'A scalded cat fears cold water ... and we cannot base our return to work on a promise, above all when that promise is stripped of any guarantee'. Sarr showed the telegram to Sissoko, who was angered and gave indications that he would actively intervene to get the Soudanais railwaymen to go back to work.⁷⁸

⁷² Senghor to Minister, 26 Nov. 1947, K 457 (179).

⁷³ *Renseignements*, 17 Dec. 1947, K 457 (179).

⁷⁴ Sissoko had earlier telegraphed the Ministry to remind them of the 'lamentable situation of several thousand families' affected by the strike, of the 'economic perturbation' leading to a 'fiasco' in the 1948 harvest, and of the unfortunate effects of turning the strike into a 'test of force'. Sissoko to Ministry, telegram, 3 Dec. 1947, IGT 13/2. This language was fully consistent with the tack being taken by most of the West African deputies.

⁷⁵ Note signed by Pillot, for the Dakar-Niger Réseau, for M le Directeur Fédéral de la Régie des Chemins de Fer de l'AOF, and sent by Cunéo to the President of the Conseil d'Administration, 19 Jan. 1948, K 457 (179). The administration was thinking that they could split off the Soudanais as early as the end of December. *Renseignements*, Thiès, 27 Dec. 1947, K 457 (179).

⁷⁶ Note by Pillot, K 457 (179).

⁷⁷ Secretary General of Government General, to Sissoko, 29 Jan. 1948, copy enclosed Inspection du Travail, Bamako, to IGT, 7 Feb. 1948, K 457 (179).

⁷⁸ Inspection du Travail, Bamako, to IGT, 7 Feb. 1948, Moussa Diarra, on behalf of *Comité Directeur*, telegram to Sarr, 29 Jan. 1948, and *Renseignements*, 4 Feb. 1948, K 457 (179). Another telegram sent by the *Comité Directeur* at Thiès to the Soudan attacked the entire initiative of Sissoko: 'Regret to put you on guard against the bad propaganda of the Sage of the Soudan who despite promises of devotion to cause attempts

The Inspection du Travail in Bamako reported that Sissoko indeed asked workers to go back, effective 2 February. The union appealed to them to hold fast. And this they did: at Bamako only seven workers returned to work on the day indicated.⁷⁹ Sissoko's intervention did little more than discredit him, although it may have made the union leadership nervous enough to look more favorably on the next settlement initiative in early March.

It had taken the leading elected politicians of French West Africa two months to intervene, and their efforts over the next two months accomplished little more than splitting the railwaymen of the Ivory Coast from their comrades elsewhere. Although Senghor, in a private letter to the minister, had assimilated the cause of the strikers to his anti-racist cause, he had done nothing to tap the popular mobilization that was part of the strike. Houphouët-Boigny had invoked the spectre of colonialism in a Dakar speech, but at virtually the same time he was working behind the scenes to end the strike in the Ivory Coast.

In Senegal, Senghor is said to have helped to settle the strike. This perception is more a consequence of what happened after the strike than what he did during it. Senghor realized that the union was one of the most important organized blocks of voters in the territory, and he set about straightening things out.⁸⁰ He made Sarr a candidate on his ticket for the Assembly of the Union Française, and he was duly elected in 1953. He is remembered in Thiès for having incorporated the railway workers union into his political movement, but with more than a hint that the workers did more for him than he for them.⁸¹

The story does not end here. As part of the leadership of Senghor's Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais, Sarr – who did not forget his origins – allied himself with the left wing of the party, and in particular with Mamadou Dia, who became Senghor's Prime Minister after independence. But when Dia and Senghor broke, and Dia and his allies were accused of crimes against the state, Sarr, along with Dia, was imprisoned, a fate he had not suffered at the hands of the French government.⁸²

None of this negates the argument – which is the main point of Sembene's fictionalized account – that the struggle itself galvanized a *popular* sentiment

negative propaganda of destruction through numerous telegrams and letters addressed to Soudan. Consider intervention of this man as destruction orchestrated with directors of Régie at their visit to Bamako'. Diarra to Moriba Cissoko, 4 Feb. 1948, in *Renseignements, Soudan*, 5 February 1948, K 379 (26).

⁷⁹ Inspection du Travail, Bamako, to IGT, 7 Feb. 1948, K 457 (179).

⁸⁰ A month after the strike, as Suret-Canale notes, Senghor finally wrote an article on the subject, in which he in fact mentioned that he 'did not write a single article on the question and ... if I dealt with it at times in my speeches, I did so voluntarily, in measured terms'. He claimed support for the principle of nondiscrimination and, in practical terms, for compromise. The quotation is from *La Condition Humaine*, 26 Apr. 1948, as translated in Suret-Canale, 'Railway workers' strike,' 145.

⁸¹ Mory Tall, Oumar NDiaye and Amadou Bouta Gueye (interviews, 9 Aug. 1994), Mansour Niang (interview, 4 Aug. 1994).

⁸² The same thing happened to another leading labor leader of the 1950s, Alioune Cissé. His militant trade unionism never landed him in jail under the French, but Senghor put him there for his role in organizing a general strike in 1968 – an irony he remains well aware of, as he does in the case of Sarr (interview, Dakar, 4 Aug. 1994, by Oumar Gueye, Alioune Ba and Frederick Cooper).

hostile to the hypocrisies of the colonial regime and led to a sense of empowerment among the strikers whose implications undoubtedly went beyond the sphere of labor. But organizationally, things were not so clear. Neither the major parties nor the major trade union confederations made the railwaymen's cause their own. Neither gave the railwaymen much reason to have confidence in their ability to represent the cause of labor. The strike of 1947–8 was a railway strike of extraordinary proportions, but it began and ended as a railway strike.

THE AMBIVALENCES OF COLONIAL REPRESSION

The government side of the issue leaves its puzzles too: why officials allowed a disruptive strike to drag on so long without being either more repressive or more conciliatory. The government at first had no idea that it would face a long strike: 'The strike will no doubt last a few weeks. It is unpopular in all milieux – merchants, politicians, and workers'. This expectation may be why virtually nothing was done until November to try to maintain railway traffic.⁸³ And the arrogance of the assumption that the Régie would soon prevail no doubt communicated itself to the well-placed network of spies, who kept telling their bosses that the strike was about to collapse.⁸⁴ Self-deception was thus an important element in prolonging the strike.

Although the Régie had conceded the *cadre unique* and the integration of auxiliaries in April, it was struggling for the power to give content to those ideas. Increasingly, the strike itself became the principal issue. On the very eve of the strike, Governor General Barthes, in his last-ditch meeting with union leaders, lectured them on 'the terms of the law and my intention of insuring that it is respected'.⁸⁵ He immediately (and in accordance with those terms) sent the dispute to an arbitrator and then to an arbitral committee – which on 31 October in effect affirmed the agreement of April 1947 and on the whole agreed with the Régie's interpretation of it. From the first, the Governor General and the Régie insisted that the arbitration proceedings alone had legal standing and that negotiation over them was out of the question. The stance led to a virtual loss of contact between Régie and union, and the Inspection du Travail, whose interventions had been critical to settling previous strikes, was largely frozen out of the action.⁸⁶ Only in

⁸³ Directeur Fédéral de la Régie to Directeur de l'Office Central des Chemins de Fer de la France Outre-Mer, 10 Oct. 1947, IGT 13/2.

⁸⁴ For example, Renseignements, 25 Oct. 1947, K 457 (179): 'One detects considerable discontent among the strikers who without any doubt did not expect a strike of this length. If it weren't for religious superstition, many would already have returned to work'. A week later, the report was, 'The enthusiasm of the beginning has completely fallen... the women in particular are starting to get agitated and can expect that 50 per cent at least of the strikers demand to return to work'. Renseignements, 3 Nov. 1947, K 43 (1). Still later, it was the 'profound weariness' of the strikers which gave rise to expectations for a quick end to the strike. IGT to Governor General, 15 Dec. 1947, K 457 (179). The strike still had three months to go.

⁸⁵ Governor General to Minister, 11 Oct. 1947, IGT 13/2.

⁸⁶ AOF, IGT, Annual Report, 1947, 62. See for example the transcript of the meeting of the Conseil d'Administration of the Régie, 15 Nov. 1947 (K 459 [179]), at which Cunéo remarked: 'Whatever may be the consequences of the strike of African personnel, it seems that respect for the decisions of the judiciary, respect for legality, forbids the opening of new negotiations'.

December were some minor concessions being talked about: making the integration of auxiliaries retroactive to 1 July instead of 15 July, allowing 'individual' reclassifications of some railwaymen in categories where the union had demanded systematic reclassification, and allowing fifteen instead of ten days leave in case of marriages, births and deaths.⁸⁷ But it was still on the grounds of the sacrosanct nature of the arbitration decision that the Governor General refused the December initiative of the West African parliamentarians.⁸⁸ As late as 3 February, the administration in Dakar claimed that even sending an *Inspecteur du Travail* to talk to the union would be interpreted as a sign of loss of will, and that it was still necessary that the affair 'end by the total execution of the arbitration ruling'.⁸⁹

Yet at the same time, the administration pulled its punches. At first it did nothing to enforce the arbitrator's judgment: it did not arrest the strike leaders, replace the illegally striking workers with new recruits, or requisition the workers, which would have put them under military discipline. All these options were discussed within the Government General and in Paris, but all were at first considered provocative. Only in the first week of November did the Régie make known its intention to hire replacements for the strikers, and even then the Governor General saw it necessary to explain that 'now, traffic must be assured as far as possible, despite the prolonged absence of African railwaymen'. The minister agreed, but wanted such hiring kept to a 'strict minimum'.⁹⁰ Such drastic measures as conscripting strikers into military service were viewed with considerable skepticism at the highest levels of the Ministry. Officials were no doubt reluctant to escalate for fear of going against their own initiatives of the post-war era: to constitute a new approach to labor based on ending forced labor, developing a system of industrial relations, and incorporating trade unions into that system. Measures intended to crush the union and coerce unwilling workers into the workplace would not help the cause. As Robert Delavignette, then head of Political Affairs in the Ministry in Paris, put it 'the strong style directed at the strikers will not itself resolve the problem (one has seen this in the recent past, even in AOF), if the government gives the impression of going back, after a detour, on trade union freedom and on the abolition of forced labor'.⁹¹

⁸⁷ The latter concessions were made apropos of an attempt by a deputy and a leader of the *Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens*, Joseph Dumas, to mediate the dispute, with the proviso that if the mission failed the Régie would undertake massive publicity of the terms offered in order to induce railwaymen to break with their union and go back to work. IGT to Governor General, 15 Dec. 1947, K 457 (179). The *Inspecteur Général du Travail*, Pélisson, wanted to let railway workers know that their wages might be revised in parallel with revisions being planned for the civil service, and that he favored giving 'at least partial satisfaction' to the railwaymen, while trying 'to save the face of the Régie'. But the Régie was not interested in saving face, and Dumas was left with narrow possibilities for maneuver, and predictably failed. IGT Note for Dumas, 18 Dec. 1947, K 457 (179).

⁸⁸ *Paris-Dakar*, 26 Dec. 1947, and Minutes of Grand Conseil, 24 Dec. 1947, cited in Suret-Canale, 'Railway workers' strike', 145, 153, n. 25.

⁸⁹ *Affaires Courantes*, Dakar, telegram to the new Governor General, Béchar, 3 Feb. 1948, IGT 13/2.

⁹⁰ Governor General to Minister, telegram, 5 Nov. 1947, and Minister to Governor General, telegram, 7 Nov. 1947, IGT 13/2.

⁹¹ Delavignette, 'Grève des chemins de fer et des wharfs en AOF', 13 Dec. 1947, IGT, 13/2. For the context of post-war labor policy – notably the assertion of legitimacy through the abolition of forced labor and the attempt to build a more differentiated,

It was only in mid-November that Sarr was brought to court 'for having ordered the strike in violation of the decree of 20 March 1937 on compulsory arbitration'. Fiankan, the Ivory Coast leader, had been prosecuted earlier and sentenced to three months in prison for interference with the liberty to work, although he was not in fact jailed and his conviction was overturned on appeal. Sarr was sentenced on 11 December 1947 to twenty days in jail and a fine of 1,200 francs for leading an illegal strike, but he never served his sentence: in April, after the strike, the appeals court commuted his sentence to a fine of 100 francs, suspended. Significantly, the prosecutors went after Fiankan again immediately after the Ivory Coast strike was broken and they were anxious to remove him from the scene lest he start it up again. He was convicted of threatening people who returned to work and sentenced to six months in prison on 22 January, but his sentence was later reduced on appeal to two months and a fine, and in the end he was pardoned. There were also some prosecutions in Dahomey and Guinea, most of which ended in acquittals.⁹²

Nor did the Régie play another card it had: many of the strikers lived in railway housing, concentrated in various *cités* in key depots. One of the demands of the union was to open such housing to auxiliaries: lodging was quite valuable given the poor infrastructure of colonial towns, and the linkage of housing to job was part of the stabilization strategy of post-war governments. The Régie kept threatening to expel strikers from their homes unless they returned to work, but it did not do so.⁹³ Perhaps its caution came from the notion – repeated often in reports in the immediate post-war years – that African labor was inherently unstable, all too likely to jump from job to job or return to village life. It was the most experienced and skilled workers who were housed, and it would have been consistent with thinking on the 'stabilization' issue for the Régie to fear that once such workers left the *cités*, they might never be heard from again.

The weapons that the Régie was left with, then, were to manipulate the divisions within the work force and try to get enough manpower in place to run the railway system well enough to avoid economic paralysis. By November, the Régie had started to hire new workers and it kept issuing appeals to strikers – with a mixture of promises and threats – to go back individually. The appeal stressed that the Régie had already agreed (and the arbitration award made this explicit) to the reorganization of the cadres, in some form at least, and to the integration of at least a significant number of auxiliaries. The poster distributed to the Ivory Coast, for example, pointed out that these measures would mean a 'large raise' for the cadres and

stable, manageable labor force – see Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*. Both policies came to the fore in 1946, as did the new development program, and French officials were eager to demonstrate to a world increasingly skeptical of denials of self-determination that social, economic and political development were at the heart of colonial policy.

⁹² Governor General to Minister, 20 Nov. 1947, IGT 13/2; Directeur, Sûreté, to IGT, 15 Sept. 1948, K 458 (179).

⁹³ Cunéo (Director of Régie) draft letter to all regional directors, 9 Jan. 1948, reminding them that strikers, as of 28 November 1947, had been 'detached' from the Régie and warning them that if they did not return by 15 January they would be dislodged: K 457 (179). For earlier threats, see Renseignements, 19 Nov. 1947, K 378 (26), and Inspection du Travail, Guinea, to IGT, 19 Nov. 1947, K 457 (179).

'a very large raise for qualified auxiliaries'. The threat was that, as of November, strikers had been officially 'detached' from their posts, but that the regime would take them back with seniority intact if they returned immediately and not at all if they held out.⁹⁴

None of this was very effective until the Ivory Coast gave way in early January. As of 1 November, three weeks into the strike, 487 Europeans and 38 Africans were trying to run a railway. By 2 January, 836 strikers had gone back to work and 2,416 new workers had been hired. Even if one accepts the Régie's claim that it really needed only 13,500 men, not the 17,000 it had had before the strike (and after the strike the Régie came up with a new figure of 15,000), the Régie had only recovered little over a quarter of its African workforce. In the crucial 'material and traction' section of the Dakar-Niger line, which included locomotive drivers and other running personnel, less than a sixth of the posts were filled on 2 January. Indeed, the entire Dakar-Niger branch remained solid: 1,125 workers of both races were all there was to do the job of 6,765. The Conakry-Niger line – 1,196 at work out of 2,014 – and the Abidjan-Niger line – 1,424 out of 3,111 – were shakier.⁹⁵

After the return to work in the Ivory Coast, the administration hoped that the other lines would give way, but their most serious attempt, via Fily Dabo Sissoko, to hive off a large section of workers from the union failed. As of 1 February 1948, the active workers as a percentage of theoretical staffing stood at 32 per cent on the Dakar-Niger, 54 per cent on the Conakry-Niger, and 16 per cent on the Benin-Niger. Overall, this meant that 34 per cent of staffing needs were being met.⁹⁶

Officials thought that the union was able to prevent hiring through its influence in the railway centers.⁹⁷ Even where new workers were signed on, they did not necessarily work well. This was particularly the case at the wharfs in the Ivory Coast where a mixture of European and African strikebreakers, plus a detachment from the Marine Nationale flown from Dakar to the Ivory Coast, had been put to work. 'The results have not lived up to our hopes, because the detachment which was sent was composed of unskilled workers who had never driven the equipment that was confided to them and which was relieved at the end of a month on the scene just when the Marines began to get used to the material they were using'.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Annex to Renseignements, Ivory Coast, 30 Dec. 1947, K 379 (26). Boldface and underlining in original.

⁹⁵ IGT, AOF, to IGT, Paris, 8 Jan. 1948, IGT 13/2; AOF, Inspection du Travail, Annual Report, 1947, 62. In February, Africans *en service* for the Régie founded a new Professional Association, headed by none other than François Gning. The call to its first meeting stated, 'We speak to you here with a French heart for the true France'. Its goal was to 'constitute in the heart of the Régie a true family of railwaymen where love of work will be the uniting trait between management and staff'. Even at this meeting, objections were made to Gning's leadership. The Association would give rise to a union, which would contest Sarr's union after the strike, but without a great deal of success. Renseignements, 8 Feb. 1948, K 457 (179).

⁹⁶ On these three lines, 839 workers had returned to their posts (including a few who had never left them) and 2,155 had been hired. Situation de la Régie au 1er Fevrier 1948, K 457 (179). ⁹⁷ Governor General to Minister, 21 Nov. 1947, IGT 13/2.

⁹⁸ Directeur Général de l'Office Central des Chemins de Fer de la France Outre-Mer, Note, 15 Dec. 1947, IGT 13/2. Similar disappointment was felt with strike-breaking labor on the wharf in Dahomey. Dahomey, Inspection du Travail, Annual Report, 1947, 33.

Traffic had plunged after the strike and had only partially been restored. In mid-February, passenger traffic on the Dakar-Niger was at 12 per cent of its recent average, goods traffic at 43 per cent. On the Conakry-Niger, passenger traffic was at 20 per cent, goods at 48 per cent. On the Benin-Niger, passenger traffic stood at 10 per cent, goods traffic at 30 per cent.⁹⁹ Its effects were felt not only in the damage it was doing to the French campaign to resupply the metropole, but also in the scarcities of goods that were occurring throughout French West Africa and which threatened the painful effort that was being made to provide incentives to peasants to grow marketable crops and workers to work.¹⁰⁰ In fact, the timing of the strike was crucial in this sense: France had with fanfare launched a 'development' initiative in 1946, and the railway strike served both to undermine its economic goals and take the luster off its ideological intervention.

At the end of January, about 300 men from the French railways were sent to Dakar to provide skilled labor, particularly in the troublesome Traction division. Some white CGT leaders and the anti-colonial press urged them not to act as strike breakers, and apparently some asked to be taken back to France or else subtly undermined their own presence by pretending that their equipment was not properly functioning. The fact that the French locomotive drivers were not familiar with the steam locomotives still in use in Africa – and which African drivers knew intimately – may have contributed to the subsequent decision to accelerate dieselization of the system.¹⁰¹

However much the administration's actions fell short of all-out combat, the union's achievement in holding together for so long stands out. There is no question that leadership played a big part in it: the strike had been extensively discussed within railway communities in advance and scrupulously planned. Sarr had made the rounds of the depots and cemented a personal identification of the cause with himself and with the strike committee. He ordered his followers to 'stay home and not to indulge themselves in any outside demonstration or any sabotage' – an order which was by all indications followed.¹⁰² In Thiès, the strikers held daily open meetings, where doubts and concerns were aired, but peer pressure was maintained. Whenever there were signs of wavering along the Dakar-Niger line, Sarr went on tour and reaffirmed the personal ties and the group loyalties. Security officials were convinced that this direct approach was effective: 'Before the passage of Sarr, many of them were getting ready to return to work; afterwards, they have again decided, more so than ever, to continue the strike'.¹⁰³ Fily Dabo Sissoko – in the midst of his effort to get

⁹⁹ Affaires Courantes, Dakar, to Minister, 14 Feb. 1948, IGT 13/2.

¹⁰⁰ Inspection du Travail, Guinea, to IGT, 19 Nov. 1947, K 457 (179); Delavignette, 'Grève des chemins de fer...', 13 Dec. 1947, IGT 13/2.

¹⁰¹ Gendarmerie Mobile, Rapport, 15 Nov. 1947, K 43 (1); Suret-Canale, 'Railway workers' strike', 140; Abdoulaye Soulaye Sarr (interview, 22 July 1990); Sene, 'Grève des cheminots', 117.

¹⁰² Renseignements, 25 Oct. 1947, K 43 (1). His warning was later published in *Réveil*, 20 Nov. 1947. The orders against demonstrations were passed out in the Soudan as well. Renseignements, Bamako, 11 Oct. 1947, K 43 (1).

¹⁰³ Renseignements, 13 Nov. 1947, K 457 (179), in regard to Sarr's trip to the Soudan. There are extensive reports from police spies of meetings at Thiès and elsewhere. See, for example, Renseignements, 29 Oct., 25 Dec. 1947, *ibid.* and Renseignements, 16 Oct. 1947, K 43 (1).

the Soudanais back to work – told French officials that ‘The Soudanais considered themselves bound to the union Leader by a pact which it would be dishonorable to break’.¹⁰⁴

However impressive the leadership, collective and personal, it was clearly rooted in railway communities – in towns like Thiès and Kayes, where railway workers and their families lived together as well as worked together, and where they were part of broad networks linking them to merchants and farmers in the area. In any case, Pélisson, the Inspecteur Général du Travail noted a crucial aspect of solidarity on the railway: it crossed all ranks.

It is important to observe that the [strike] order was followed not only by the agents of the permanent cadre and the auxiliaries eligible to be integrated into it, the only people with an interest in the agreement under discussion, but also by the mass of ordinary auxiliaries – manual laborers for the most part – and by the personnel of the wharfs whose situation was not at all in question. Led into this behavior by a limitless confidence in their leaders and their directions, undoubtedly as well by fear and at times by concern to keep their word, the African railwaymen have until now kept up, calmly and with respect for public order which is much to their credit, a strike whose prolongation seemed, however, more and more like a dead end.¹⁰⁵

DEFECTION, DEFIANCE AND AN AMBIGUOUS RESOLUTION

The strike broke first in the Ivory Coast. Pélisson attributed this to the behind-the-scenes machinations of Houphouët-Boigny, but it is also clear that a second tier of union officials staged a kind of coup while Fiankan, the Secretary General of the Abidjan-Niger railway union, was out of the country. The Ivory Coast union was clearly divided, and the officers whom Fiankan had replaced when he became Secretary General had, as early as November, intrigued against him. Fiankan for a time wavered in his support of the strike. Houphouët-Boigny had reportedly told the union leaders of his disapproval of the timing of the strike and their failure to consult him. When the news of the failure of the intervention of the deputies in December reached Abidjan in a telegram from Sarr on 30 December, it led to a tense meeting of a hundred railwaymen, presided over by Djoman, the Adjunct Secretary. Sarr’s telegram was pessimistic, but argued that the only way for railwaymen to keep their jobs was to carry the strike to a successful conclusion. Maître Diop, a lawyer and member of the Grand Conseil just returned from Dakar, confirmed the failure of the Dakar initiative. The Regional Director had shrewdly timed an offer (quoted above) to rehire all workers on the Abidjan-Niger who returned to work at that time, promising wage increases that would flow from the reclassifications approved in the arbitration ruling. The meeting divided between those who favored a return to work and those who wanted to await the return of Fiankan.¹⁰⁶

The next day, Fiankan was being blamed for his absence (he was in

¹⁰⁴ Sissoko therefore saw convincing Sarr as the key. He miscalculated the nature of the union leadership, however, since the strike committee ordered a wavering Sarr not to give in. Governor, Soudan, to Governor General, 12 Jan. 1948, K 378 (26).

¹⁰⁵ IGT, Report, 24 Jan. 1948, IGT 13/2.

¹⁰⁶ Renseignements, Ivory Coast, 14, 15 Nov., 30 Dec. 1947, K 379 (26). On Houphouët-Boigny’s role, see Renseignements, 5 Nov. 1947, *ibid.* and IGT to Deputy Dumas, 6 Jan. 1948, IGT 13/2.

Dakar), and the supporters of the strike were rapidly becoming discouraged. Over the next few days, the failure of the parliamentarians to settle the strike weighed heavily on a divided and depressed group of trade unionists. Sarr was blamed for starting the strike, 'traitors' for trying to end it. Diop and Djoman came out for a return to work. This was decided on 4 January, effective the next day. When Fiankan returned on 5 January, the men had gone back.¹⁰⁷ Meeting with a group of railwaymen at Treichville, Fiankan called them 'traitors to your comrades in Dahomey, Guinea and the Soudan' and demanded why they had gone back. 'It was the Committee in accord with Maitre Diop who gave the order to go back', he was told. Fiankan urged them to strike again. They replied, 'We have suffered enough'.¹⁰⁸

Leadership was clearly of the utmost importance in maintaining such a strike.¹⁰⁹ The Ivory Coast workers went back essentially under the terms of the arbitration decision, which provided that auxiliaries would be integrated into the cadres in accordance with their qualifications. The members of the cadres were, as promised, taken back to their old posts, but auxiliaries found that the conditions of their return were indeed problematic. The Régie had promised that the strikebreakers hired in the interim – and there were 755 of them out of a theoretical staffing of 3,111 – would keep their jobs, and it was the less senior auxiliaries who would bear the brunt. The Government General in Dakar – despite fear of trouble from the Governor in Abidjan – was content for the laid off auxiliaries to learn that a 'strike always carries risks above all when it takes place outside legal procedures'.¹¹⁰

All this served notice that the government was going to play as tough when workers went back as they had when they were out on strike. Perhaps this experience contributed to the determination of the other regions to hold out and to the union's toughness in the post-strike period.

It was only when a new High Commissioner came to French West Africa that further movement took place. Paul Béchar, taking advantage of his arrival, undertook to talk to the principals beginning 26 February. Béchar, as he himself later told it, decided that taking the legalistic line to its logical conclusion – by firing the railwaymen for violation of the arbitration ruling – was 'a brutal solution of rupture with unpredictable political consequences'. He sought a 'last try at conciliation', and he issued a series of proposals based on, but slightly modifying, the arbitration ruling:

- (1) In regard to the union's claim to make the integration of auxiliaries retroactive to 1 January 1947, he proposed 1 May 1947 in regard to pay and 1 January 1947 in regard to seniority. The Régie had wanted 1 October and the arbitrator 15 July.

¹⁰⁷ Renseignements, Ivory Coast, 31 Dec. 1947, 3, 4, 7, 8 Jan. 1948, K 379 (26).

¹⁰⁸ Renseignements, 7 Jan. 1948, K 379 (26). At Port-Bouet the next day, Fiankan was greeted with such hostility that he had to leave. *Ibid.*, 8 Jan. 1948.

¹⁰⁹ The strike had not been as solid on the Abidjan-Niger line as on the other lines. On the former, 519 workers had returned to work by 1 January 1948, out of a theoretical labor force of 3,111. On the Dakar-Niger, only 236 out of 6,765 had given up by that date, while only 71 workers on the other two lines combined went back before the new year. IGT, AOF, to IGT, Paris, 8 Jan. 1948, IGT 13/2.

¹¹⁰ Governor, Ivory Coast, to High Commissioner, telegram, 12 Jan. 1948, and Affaires Politiques, Administratives et Sociales to Governor, Ivory Coast, telegram, 20 Jan. 1948, K 378 (26).

- (2) In regard to the reclassification of certain agents in the *cadres secondaires*, Béchard maintained the Régie's equivalence tables, but granted extra seniority to the agents in question.
- (3) In regard to where examinations would be required to pass between scales, he placed examination barriers where the Régie wanted them, and also where the union wanted them.
- (4) In regard to the union's demand for 15 days annual leave, in addition to a month's vacation, which the Régie had rejected and the arbitrator reduced to ten days, the High Commissioner agreed to 15, but only for family events and only if necessities of service permitted.
- (5) In regard to the union's demand for the provision of lodging or a compensatory indemnity to all agents, he agreed with the Régie's position, supported by the arbitrator, that this could not be guaranteed for all.
- (6) In regard to the union's demand for a uniform indemnity of zone, at the rate then accorded the highest rank – as opposed to the Régie's and the arbitrator's proposal for incorporating the old, hierarchical indemnities into a hierarchical wage scale and adding an indemnity of residence for places with a high cost of living – Béchard held firm to the Régie's position.

The High Commissioner decided in addition that there would be no punishment for striking, that the Régie would take back all its personnel in the cadres, that all auxiliaries currently at work would be kept on, and that striking auxiliaries would be taken back in order of seniority until the staffing levels had been filled.¹¹¹

The High Commissioner was going along with the Régie on the issues where concessions would be the most costly. In both cases – housing and the hierarchical indemnities – he was not denying an agreed-upon benefit to railwaymen, but preserving the Régie's power to determine the modalities of implementation. In particular, the Régie retained wide discretion to maintain differentiation in emoluments: the incorporation of the highly unequal indemnity of zone into wages would preserve hierarchy, while the smaller and egalitarian indemnity of residence – applied by place and not by rank – would give lip service to equalizing adjustments for variations in the cost of living. Housing would be an emolument that could be used flexibly by the Régie to attract those categories of workers it wanted most. None of these differentials was explicitly racial, nor had any of them been that way in the Régie's offer or the arbitrator's ruling. On the other questions, Béchard's decisions appeared positively Solomonic: each side could claim it got something out of the battle. These proposals, of course, could have been made months earlier.

Union leaders, after discussing the proposal among themselves came back the next day, 15 March, expressing overall acceptance of the proposals but with a single objection: they wanted a guarantee that all auxiliaries would get their jobs back. Béchard later congratulated himself for having 'the intuition that this exigency constituted the stumbling block to the return', for the union had to protect its rank and file. By 4 a.m. he had a compromise: he would still protect those who had returned to work before the negotiated

¹¹¹ High Commissioner's narrative of strike, 1 Apr. 1948, K 458 (179).

settlement but agreed to take back in principle all striking auxiliaries. But within a month, and after negotiations between the Régie and the union, a new staffing table – providing for a reduction of the workforce – would come into effect and auxiliaries' rights to keep their jobs would depend on seniority and competence. Striking auxiliaries who had filled, before the strike, the conditions for integration into the cadres would keep the benefits of the transition program. He also made a slight concession on one of the strike issues, easing the examination barriers for passing between certain ranks. Strike days would not be paid. As compensation for the increased cost of living, the Régie was to raise (retroactive to 1 January 1948) wages, expatriation and displacement benefits, and management benefits by 20 per cent, and increase an indemnity of residence for Dakar, Abidjan and other cities. The 20 per cent in this context hardly seemed to be the technical adjustment it was alleged to be but a response to a disciplined strike. Any disagreements over the implementation of the agreement would go to a commission including one representative of the High Commissioner, and two each from the Régie and the union.

The Régie and the union accepted these proposals, and the return to work was fixed for that Friday, 19 March. Béchard concluded his report on the strike, 'It left no victors, no vanquished. Reasons for excessive bitterness for one side or the other have been avoided. Work could be resumed on solid bases, ignoring former divisions, in good order and with confidence'.¹¹²

Sarr, returning to Thiès after signing the agreement, claimed that the High Commissioner had 'given us concessions which the Régie did not want to give us ... Thus, comrades, our honor is safe and we will return to work having shown that we were men who know what we want'. He did not want strikers to get into disputes with nonstrikers: 'We will resume work calmly, and with discipline'. The end of the strike was celebrated with a long march at Thiès, followed by meetings and dancing. It was an occasion of joy, an expression of confidence in organization and unity. In the years that followed, many children of railwaymen were named after Ibrahima Sarr.¹¹³ The end of the strike is remembered today as a 'magnificent' victory bringing equality and the end of racial discrimination within the labor force, as a 'clear improvement' in the lives of workers, as an achievement won on behalf of the auxiliaries integrated into the cadres.¹¹⁴

AFTERMATH

Almost immediately, the two sides plunged into a struggle over the staffing table, over deciding which auxiliaries would be kept and over how integration would take place. The intensity of the disputes must have reminded everyone

¹¹² High Commissioner's narrative, 1 Apr. 1948, K 458 (179); *Protocole de Reprise du Travail*, 15 Mar. 1948, IGT 13/2.

¹¹³ *Renseignements*, 16 Mar. 1948, K 458 (179); Sene, 'Grève des cheminots', 104, 112. The administration feared that auxiliaries, who were still at risk, might try to block the return to work, but Sarr vowed to defend them, and officials noted that 'we must assume that he will not give way on this point'. *Renseignements*, 16 Mar. 1948, K 458 (179).

¹¹⁴ Abdoulaye Souleye Sarr (interview, 22 July 1990), Oumar NDiaye and Amadou Bouta Gueye (interview, 9 Aug. 1994) and Mansour Niang (interview, 4 Aug. 1994).

concerned of why the strike had been fought so determinedly.¹¹⁵ Management asserted its prerogative to fire people for incompetence or other reasons; the union had the implicit threat of another strike behind its demands.

The discussions over the labor force reduction lasted over two years. The Régie had intended to reduce its 17,000-man force even before the strike began; such a reduction was its *quid pro quo* during the April negotiations for agreeing to restructuring the cadres and integrating auxiliaries. In the midst of the strike, and probably for political purposes, it claimed it only needed 13,500. But when it came to listing necessary workers, the Régie found it needed to ponder the question – amidst challenges from the union – and then came up with a figure of 14,748 in June 1948. Given the fact that over 2,000 strike-breakers had been hired (not counting the Abidjan-Niger branch) and had to be kept on under the terms of the Protocol, this meant that as many as 5,000 workers could have lost their jobs. But as further delays ensued – including protracted and heated negotiations throughout the summer – many workers left voluntarily, while new works projects and the need to take care of neglected maintenance increased needs, so that by September the number of workers in jeopardy was around 2,500.¹¹⁶

Some of the voluntary resignations apparently resulted from union members making life difficult for the *défaillants* or *jaunes*, as strike-breakers were called.¹¹⁷ From the very start, the union challenged management on so many points that the director complained that his regional directors

find themselves in an annoying situation *vis-à-vis* the unions because of the fact that they are constantly accused of violating the end of strike protocol with threats of informing the Governor General or the Inspecteur Général du Travail. The authority necessary for the execution of a public service is dangerously disturbed.¹¹⁸

What was happening was good, hard negotiating, carried out within the new Commission at the federal level (as well as the Conseil d'Administration of

¹¹⁵ The Inspection du Travail realized immediately that the question of rehiring auxiliaries would be the crucial one in the upcoming weeks. Pélisson thought that the less senior auxiliaries, who were vulnerable to lose their jobs, should be clearly informed of this, so that any who had taken other jobs during their strike could decide if it were advisable to keep them. He thought that Inspecteurs du Travail, not the Régie, should be the ones to break the bad news. IGT, circular to Inspecteurs Territoriaux du Travail, 17 Mar. 1948, IGT 13/2.

¹¹⁶ These ups and downs are traced in IGT to Inspecteur Général des Colonies, 6 Sept. 1948, K 458 (179), and can be followed in Renseignements, June–September 1948, 11 D 1/1392. The 14,748 figure was agreed to, by a vote of 11–2, at the meeting of the Conseil d'Administration of the Régie, 25 June 1948, transcript in IGT 13/2. At this time, the plan was to fire 2,500 unskilled workers on 31 July, followed by three batches of 850 each of skilled workers. The actual firings turned out to be considerably less drastic.

¹¹⁷ Inspecteur Territorial du Travail, Dahomey, to IGT, 1 Apr. 1948, IGT 13/2; IGT, Règlement de la grève des chemins de fer africain de l'AOF, 24 Sept. 1948, *ibid.* The tension at Thiès was heightened by the presence of the union of nonstrikers organized on the Dakar-Niger by Gning. But for all of Gning's obsequiousness *vis-à-vis* the administration, the latter wanted no part of his union, for it knew where the power lay, and it systematically denied it a place on the bodies which negotiated terms of layoffs and rehiring. High Commissioner to Gning, 15 June 1948, K 458 (179).

¹¹⁸ Directeur Fédéral de la Régie des Chemins de Fer to Inspecteur Général du Travail, 9 Apr. 1948, K 458 (179).

the Régie) and within each of the branch lines. The Régie recognized the need to balance its desire to minimize costs with a desire for an 'appeasement policy', and in bargaining sessions the union insisted on 'the social side of the problem'. This meant avoiding brutal layoffs while using the labor force to assure neglected maintenance and the 'modernization of its equipment and its installations', which the Régie had proclaimed its goal. One top official admitted that in the course of 115 hours of meetings, the two sides had come closer together and concessions had been 'pulled out of the Régie', which admitted that its first tables were too theoretical and that more staffing was needed.¹¹⁹ Then, from June through September, the details of where the axe would fall were negotiated. By this time, attrition had eased the problem somewhat, some of the workers hired during the strike were fired for incompetence and others for faults committed before the strike, and the union negotiated that layoffs take place in three batches, in August, September and October. Lists were generated by trade and seniority, and they were given to the union. Regional commissions heard disputes. Most, according to the Inspection, were settled unanimously. The axe did fall: the August firings consisted of 671 on the Dakar-Niger, 92 on the Conakry-Niger, 112 on the Abidjan-Niger, and 258 on the Benin-Niger, a total of 1,133. In September, 380 workers were fired. At Thiès, where the problem was regarded as 'the thorniest', the Inspecteurs got 348 rehired as temporaries, and encouraged others to seek work as dockers in Dakar or laborers on a development scheme on the Senegal River.¹²⁰ In Dahomey and in the Ivory Coast, the union succeeded in getting significant numbers of workers slated for lay off to be reinstated.¹²¹

The Inspecteur Général du Travail admitted that 'the social malaise remains considerable', particularly the tension between white and black railwaymen. He hoped that the departure of some European railwaymen

¹¹⁹ Statements of Pillot and Mahé for the Régie and Ousmane N'Gom for the union, Transcript of Meeting of Conseil d'Administration des Chemins de Fer de l'AOF, 25 June 1948, IGT 13/2.

¹²⁰ IGT, 'Règlement de la grève des chemins...' 24 Sept. 1948, IGT 13/2. The union's role in establishing lists of workers to be fired was not defined in the Protocol of 15 March, but was apparently offered 'spontaneously' by the Régie when it came up with its staffing table, undoubtedly to insure that the union was complicit in hard decisions that had to be made. This lengthened the proceedings, and let attrition take care of part of the problem. IGT to Sarr, 28 Oct. 1948, K 458 (179). In October, the Régie, with the consent of the union, decided to pension off auxiliaries over 55 years of age, claiming that the life-pensions or layoff indemnities were expensive, but that this would leave a more effective workforce (and would presumably ease the anxieties of younger workers). The rival union, led by Gning, complained about this, but got little more than an explanation of why the main union, Sarr's, and the Régie, had agreed to it. IGT to Gning, 18 Oct. 1948, K 458 (179).

¹²¹ In the Ivory Coast, 342 scheduled layoffs were reduced to 187. Inspection du Travail, Ivory Coast, Rapport sur l'évolution de règlement de la grève de la Régie des Chemins de fer de l'AOF (Région Abidjan-Niger), 28 Aug. 1948; Inspection du Travail, Dahomey, Rapport sur l'évolution de règlement de la grève des cheminots Africains de la Région Bénin-Niger, 25 Aug. 1948, K 458 (179). In the Soudan, most of the laborers laid off were quickly rehired, as were 73 of the 202 skilled workers. The biggest problem was auxiliaries whose skills were specific to railway work. Governor, Soudan, to High Commissioner, 9 Oct. 1948, K 458 (179).

would ease the way both to hiring more Africans and improving the atmosphere. In any case, Pélisson acknowledged, a bit grudgingly, that the union 'had done its duty in defense of the railwaymen'.¹²²

The union had to accept its share of responsibility for the process, but also credit for protecting its own men and inducing strike-breakers to quit. It concluded,

having rid ourselves of the nightmare of staff compression, the situation of all the comrades who remain will be correspondingly improved. All qualified auxiliaries will soon be integrated into the cadre. The agents of the cadre will in several days receive their recalls, fruits of a struggle that will be forever remembered. Thus all will be paid their true value and the frightening number of auxiliaries will diminish considerably by their integration into the *cadre unique* which does not distinguish white or yellow or black, but only workers, period.¹²³

But people did get hurt in this process, and in November a group of auxiliaries massed in front of Sarr's home to protest that the union was not looking after their interests and had not accomplished the promised integration of auxiliaries. They accused him of fostering his own political ambitions.¹²⁴ Indeed, the process of integrating auxiliaries was slow and partial, and some railwaymen continued to press (unsuccessfully) to regain the status of civil servants while civil servants pressed (successfully) for their own version of the *cadre unique*, with equal benefits regardless of origin.¹²⁵

The concrete gains were significant. The post-strike plan was for 2,500 auxiliaries to be integrated into the cadres. By 1950, the cadres had gone from around 12 per cent of the work force before the strike to over 31 per cent.¹²⁶ A financial evaluation of the Régie in 1952 concluded that the cost of integrating auxiliaries was one of the major factors leading to the high freight charges and precarious financial situation of the Régie, as were the substantial raises – estimated at 77 per cent – given auxiliaries since 1948. Officials pointed out in reply that the costs of the 1947 strike were still being paid and that social relations in French West Africa's largest enterprise were important not only in themselves but were 'necessary, as the strike of 1947 proved, for the sound functioning of the Régie itself. I believe that technical progress

¹²² IGT, 'Règlement de la grève des chemins ...', 24 Sept. 1948, IGT 13/2.

¹²³ Circular signed Abdoulaye Ba from the union to union subdivisions, apparently intercepted by Sûreté and filed as Renseignements, 8 Sept. 1948, K 458 (179).

¹²⁴ 'La vie syndicale en AOF', 31 January 1949, AP 3406/1. There were more protests later in 1949. Renseignements, n.d. [c. Nov. 1949] 11 D 1/1392.

¹²⁵ Labor reports noted 'malaise' in the civil service and railways. The former received legal assurance of equal pay and benefits from the 'Lamine Gueye Law' of 1950, although its implementation remained a subject of contestation. IGT, 'Rapport: cessation d'application du Protocole de reprise du Travail sur les Chemins de Fer de l'Afrique occidentale française', 2 July 1949, IGT 13/2; Ibrahima Sarr, for Fédération des Syndicats des Cheminots Africains de l'AOF to Inspecteur Général du Travail, 18 Aug. 1952, 18G 163; High Commissioner to Minister, 20 Nov. 1948, Union des Syndicats Confédérés de Dakar, Revendications, 1 May 1949, Secretary General, Services des Etudes, Note pour l'Inspecteur Général du Travail, 18 May 1949, High Commissioner to Minister, 12 Jan., 25 Feb. 1950, all in K 424 (165).

¹²⁶ IGT to Inspecteur Général des Colonies, 6 Sept. 1948, K 458 (179); Directeur Fédéral de la Régie to IGT, 30 June 1950, K 43 (1).

and social progress cannot be separated'.¹²⁷ This was a lesson that officials could not forget, and unions would remind them if they did, while rank and file might remind their union leaders if they neglected the human interests that were at stake.

In the aftermath of the strike, its political implications remained to be worked out. The administration had fought the strike as a labor dispute, not as a contest over colonial authority, restraining its authoritarian hand but stubbornly insisting on following its industrial relations procedures. The union had also fought the strike as a labor dispute, restraining itself from public demonstrations more extensive than the regular mass meetings of railwaymen at Thiès. If the rhetoric of Sarr from his first speech in May 1946 onward was filled with attacks on colonialists, it also contained numerous references to the role Africans had played as in the French military, defending French freedom, and this – along with working side by side with French railwaymen – was seen as legitimating the claim to equality of pay and benefits.¹²⁸ Similar strategies were used by others to turn the rhetoric of unity and assimilation in the Union Française into claims to entitlements: the veterans' slogan, for example, was 'equal sacrifices, equal rights'.¹²⁹ The French reference point was in fact vital to the union's entire argument: the plea for an end to racial discrimination in regard to indemnities, housing and other issues assumed the existence of a unit within which equality could be pursued.

Forty-seven years later, a former railwayman denied that the 'spirit of independence' was behind the strike; the central issue was 'respect of professional value'.¹³⁰ Yet the political meanings of the strike are more complicated than that. Equality with French railway workers was a formal demand, yet the spirit of defiance and the anger against French colonial practices could not be so neatly bounded. Nor could the self-confidence gained by the disciplined conduct of a social movement over five and a half months and a vast space be limited to the issues formally at stake. In regard to questions of popular consciousness, the vision of Sembene's novel remains germane to histories of the post-1948 era.

But popular consciousness does not make movements in a vacuum. Organization is a key concern, and here one finds a double ambiguity, in relation to trade union organization and to political parties. The community mobilization on which the strike depended was channelled – in the strike and its aftermath – through the railway union and its Comité Directeur. The very success of its negotiations drew it into a framework of industrial

¹²⁷ Mission Monguillot, 'Situation Financière de la Régie Générale des Chemins de Fer de l'AOF', Rapport 93/D, 10 Apr. 1952; Directeur Général des Finances to Monguillot, 5 May 1952, and High Commissioner to Monguillot, 17 July 1952, AP 2306/7.

¹²⁸ For example, Sarr told an audience at Kayes in November: 'We have suffered famine and thirst and we have marched naked to defend purely French interests; nothing prevents us to suffer as much today when it is a question of our own interests.' Renseignements, 31 Nov. 1947, K 457 (179). The Comité Directeur included *anciens combattants*, who remained proud of their service to both causes. Abdoulaye Souleye Sarr (interview, 22 July 1990), Amadou Bouta Gueye (interview, 9 Aug. 1994).

¹²⁹ Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), 152.

¹³⁰ Mansour Niang (interview, 4 Aug. 1994).

relations, modelled on French labor law and French practices. The union, over time, became more of a union.

And whatever the potential implications of the strike to anti-colonial politics, they were in fact channelled through the structures of political parties. The networks created by the union and by the strike as well as the memories and sentiments to which it gave rise were both enlisted in a wider cause and tamed. Senghor was the West African politician who accomplished this with particular acuity. Spending much time as a deputy in Paris and more tending to organizational work in Dakar, Senghor needed a mechanism to get beyond the limitations of the Dakar-centered politics of his mentor, Lamine Gueye. Senghor had not stood publicly by the side of the railway workers. His breakthrough occurred in reaching out to them – as he did to other constituencies via leaders, networks and pre-existing institutions. The Mouride brotherhoods were key constituents in rural areas, labor in the towns. Two of the candidates he kept on his slate after his break with Lamine Gueye in 1949 and his founding of the Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais were Sarr (for the Assemblée de l'Union Française) and Abbas Gueye, one of the heroes of the 1946 Dakar general strike (Assemblée Nationale).¹³¹

In the memories of participants, there is both pride and bitterness at this process: assertions that the railwaymen's actions set the stage for wider population mobilization, identification with Senghor as a political 'phenomenon'. But one hears from workers as well a disappointment that their own union leaders had become estranged in putting on the *boubou politique* (the robes of politics) and that their interests were being set aside in the scramble for office and the enjoyment of its perquisites. They feared that they would lose the power that derived from their professional focus and become only the 'auxiliaries' of the political parties.¹³² By the mid-1950s, the political activities of union leaders would become a source of controversy within the railway union and indeed within the labor movement of French West Africa in general.¹³³

CONCLUSION

There remained, in 1948, a great deal for African union leaders to accomplish, on the railroad as well as outside. But in following up the strike, as much as in the strike itself, they had shown that the representatives of African workers would be present where their interests were being discussed. The 1947–8 railway strike was above all a contest over power within a system of industrial relations that had only just been brought to French Africa. No longer willing to defend explicitly and overtly a system of job classifications

¹³¹ 'La vie syndicale en AOF au cours de l'année 1948', 31 Jan. 1949, including High Commissioner to Minister, 2 Feb. 1949, AP 3406/1. This report makes it clear that the union remained clear of political involvement during the strike, but that afterward politicians, and Senghor in particular, realized that 'the African railwaymen constitute in effect a very important electoral trump card in Senegal'.

¹³² The phrase *boubou politique* was used in an interview by a former government worker and low-level official in a civil service union, while the notion of becoming 'auxiliaries' to political parties comes from Mory Tall. Moussa Konaté, interview Dakar, 8 Aug. 1994, by Frederick Cooper and Alioune Ba. Tall interview, by the *équipe de Thiès*, 9 Aug. 1994.

¹³³ This theme is discussed at length in Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, ch. 11.

by race or origins, colonial officials were nonetheless willing to fight for power within the structure of bureaucratized industrial relations machinery they had created, over the details of what the wage hierarchy would be and the precise terms of access to different points within it. Hierarchy and differential access to resources were to remain fundamental to the modernized colonialism of the post-war era, and the strike of 1947–8 revealed the impossibility of separating neatly the impersonal structure of a modern institution from the racialized history of colonial rule. In so far as the struggle forced colonial officials to assert ever more vehemently that they did not mean for the new hierarchy merely to reproduce the old, in so far as control of that hierarchy had to be shared with a militant union, officials were made to confront the fact that colonial authority was no longer as colonial as it once was. Such a realization was an important part of the reconsideration by French political leaders and civil servants in the mid-1950s of the strategies and institutions on which French rule depended.¹³⁴

The determination and unity of the African railway workers made clear, for then and thereafter, that their voices would be heard. But the government of French West Africa made its point too: African unions could fight and they could win, but within certain legal and institutional structures. The very battle brought both sides ever deeper into those structures, and neither tried to take the battle outside. The railway workers drew on the strength of their communities – ties of family, commerce and religion within Thiès most notably – whereas proletarian solidarity across occupational lines or a wider African mobilization against colonialism could not be organized. At the end of 1948, a government report, reflecting on a year which had witnessed one titanic labor conflict – and a host of routine disputes and negotiations easily contained within the recently created structures of the Inspection du Travail – applauded the form in which the two sides had joined their conflict: ‘Social peace can only profit from such a crystalization of forces around two poles, certainly opposed but knowing each other better and accepting to keep contact to discuss collective bargaining agreements and conditions of work’.¹³⁵

Perhaps. The clearest sign that the terrain of struggle became more closely framed, defined and narrowed was that nothing quite like the general strike of 1946 or the railway strike of 1947–8 occurred again under French rule.¹³⁶ For the railway and the government, the strike had a high cost in wages and benefits and a higher one in the lesson learned that the new social engineering strategies of the post-war era would give rise to new forms of struggle and new claims to entitlements. The question this would eventually leave in official minds had profound implications: was it politically wise to use France as a model for Africa and assert that the French empire represented a single entity when that legitimated African claims for a French standard of

¹³⁴ This is a major theme of the concluding part of my *Decolonization and African Society*.

¹³⁵ ‘La vie syndicale en AOF’, 31 Jan. 1949, AP 3406/1.

¹³⁶ The largest subsequent event was a one-day general strike in November 1952 throughout French West Africa, spearheaded by the CGT and intended to bring pressure on the French legislature to pass the Code du Travail. There were co-ordinated strikes in 1953 over the terms of implementation of that code, but while those strikes revealed impressive co-ordination they did not entail the kind of community dynamic of the earlier ones.

living? For African railway workers integrated into the cadres, the material gains of the strike were considerable, but this achievement left open the question of whether African communities would be strengthened or segmented by the higher incomes of a distinctly defined body of men. The strike of 1947 had drawn its strength simultaneously from the communities of the railwaymen and the union's seizure of the institutions and rhetoric of post-war French imperialism as the bases for its demands. The railwaymen now faced the question of whether their strength could serve a broader population or whether in attaching themselves to the cause of national politics the strength would be drawn out of the labor movement and into political institutions where their interests, their sense of community and their visions would be lost.

SUMMARY

This essay is both a reinterpretation of the place of the French West African railway strike in labor history and part of an exploration of its effects on politics and political memory. This vast strike needs to be studied in railway depots from Senegal to the Ivory Coast. Historians need both to engage the fictional version of the strike in Ousmanne Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* and avoid being caught up in it. Interviews in the key railway and union town of Thiès, Senegal, suggest that strike veterans want to distinguish an experience they regard as their own from the novelist's portrayal. They accept the heroic vision of the strike, but offer different interpretations of its relationship to family and community and suggest that its political implications include co-optation and betrayal as much as anticolonial solidarity. Interviews complement the reports of police spies as sources for the historian. The central irony of the strike is that it was sustained on the basis of railwaymen's integration into local communities but that its central demand took railwaymen into a professionally defined, nonracial category of railwayman. The strike thus needs to be situated in relation to French efforts to define a new imperialism for the post-war era and the government's inability to control the implications of its own actions and rhetoric. Negotiating with a new, young, politically aware railway union leadership in 1946 and 1947, officials were unwilling to defend the old racial wage scales, accepted in principle the *cadre unique* demanded by the union, but fought over the question of power – who was to decide the details that would give such a cadre meaning? The article analyzes the tension between the principles of nonracial equality and African community among the railwaymen and that between colonial power and notions of assimilation and development within the government. It examines the extent to which the strike remained a railway strike or spilled over into a wider and longer term question of proletarian solidarity and anticolonial mobilization.